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Jen Culliton

Jen Culliton

BY
NELIA GARDNER WHITE



NEW YORK LONDON
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
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JEN CULLITON

CHAPTER I

JEN CULLITON'S HANDS

JEN CULLITON heard the Judge's voice calling as she came round the house and up the back steps. There had never been a time when she did not feel glad to hear that friendly, gruff voice. But to-day she was not glad. She stood still by the woodpile, her hands on the ax handle, and let him knock at the back door before she answered him. As she waited, she stared down at her hands.

Those hands were the index, really, to the book of Jen Culliton's life. They were big and brown and rough. There was a dark, roughened place along the right forefinger which stood for many vegetables pared, and the clean finger nails were cracked in two or three places. The wedding ring, wide and bright yellow, was a little tight on the flesh below the big, bony knuckle, and there were calluses on the palms. On the back

of one hand a vein stood out in knotted ugliness.

They *sound* ugly, and they looked ugly to Jen, but somehow they were not. They belonged to Jen Culliton as surely as did her khaki shirts and trousers and her great knot of Scotch-sandy hair. She was a big woman, Jen—broad of shoulder, long-limbed, wide-faced, straight-backed. She walked with a kind of mannish stride; folks could tell it from afar. Her eyes were clear gray and you had a notion she saw a great deal more than she told about. Her voice was big, too, but hearty and cheerful.

Somehow the cheerfulness was absent as she answered the Judge.

“Hello, John!” she called at last, and dropped the ax, came around to the steps. Not many people called the Judge ‘John’!

“Hello, Jen! Busy as always, I see!”

“No,” Jen’s voice was unwontedly somber. “No, I’m not busy, John—just puttering around!”

He laughed and sat down on the top step.

“Yes! I see you puttering!” Then he was suddenly serious. “But you ought to, Jen! You ought to let up now! That’s what I’m here about, really. Eph wants this place. He wanted me to feel around and see what you’d take for it.

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But you never having been one to feel around much yourself, I don't believe you'd take to it kindly from anybody else! What *would* you take, Jen?"

"Nothing," Jen said tartly. "I'm old, John—I know that well enough. But I guess I'll put in my last years on this farm that I've worked my life out on. Can't see myself anywheres else!" But she looked sternly down toward the orchard.

The Judge gave a little sigh that sounded like relief.

"Well, don't blame you, Jen! Don't blame you a bit! You've pulled through lots of trouble and hard luck here and come out on top!"

"Don't feel to-day like I'm on top, John! Don't know what's got into me. I been remembering all the tough years—and you're getting old when you do that! I got to thinking to-day of that year we raised two thousand bushel of potatoes. Couldn't hire any one to draw 'em away! We dug big pits 'n buried 'em in the ground 'n they rotted there. I guess I laughed about it then—Steve was downright discouraged and I couldn't make a show of my feelings. I even got Steve so's he laughed about 'em. But, all of a sudden, seems like I could cry about those pota-

toes, thinking about how we hoped so when we was planting and digging!"

The Judge gave her a troubled smile.

"I remember those potatoes! It was just before Phil was born, wasn't it? I came up to see the baby and you laughed and said—'He had to come to eat up those potatoes!'"

Jen laughed, a little grimly.

"I guess maybe that's why Phil's never been strong—so much of me went into that potato crop!"

"Phil's a fine boy, though—wish he was mine, Jen! Well, I've got to get back! Sorry you're feeling blue, Jen. But don't get the notion you're old! I always look at you and think—'Jen Culliton's just the same—she never changes!' and it makes me feel I'll never grow old, either! So don't go back on me, Jen!"

Jen managed her usual smile at that and then the Judge was gone and Jen sat alone on the steps, looking across the wide fields that were hers.

Sell? Sell this farm, which was part of the very warp and woof of her life? Old—maybe she was old! But she wasn't that old! A little surge of anger shook her. They were trying to put her on the shelf, were they?

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But, after that wave of anger passed, a strange, sick feeling of doubt seemed to creep into her heart. Were they, perhaps, right? She had gone her own way, managed her own life and that of others for so long now, that it almost frightened her to find some one else trying to manage hers. But—sell the farm? Why, it was her life! With that gone she'd be nothing!

There'd been nothing much before it. She remembered those first years when she'd been always too big—too big for her clothes, too big for her seat in school, too big for her grade. She used to cry over her awkwardness. But she'd found out, then, that worry doesn't make you slim or graceful or popular. And the eldest of eleven doesn't have much time for brooding, either. She'd been pretty busy—too busy, maybe, for a girl.

She had wanted to be a trained nurse, and she knew she'd have been good at it, too, but you don't get any chance to go away to study, not with ten younger. She'd never had much chance to be a girl, even. Before she knew it, she was grown, and there'd never been any playtime and Steve Culliton was asking her to marry him. He had lived with his mother a long time, and

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when she had died, he'd been very much alone and helpless. He hadn't been romantic but he'd been sincere and Jen had taken him. She hadn't been fashioned for romance, like her sister, Rosie, and she knew it. And yet, she'd envied Rosie that spring. Not afterward—oh, no, not afterward—she had had some few moments that she wouldn't want to exchange for all Rosie's romances!

But, right from the beginning, the farm had seemed to belong to her. Steve had wanted her to hire a man, but she hadn't let him. She had said she'd help out with the milking and the chores and now and again they could get a neighbor in for a day. She'd taken over the finances, the care of the chickens and dairy. She had been the man of the house. She'd put on overalls and a straw hat and gone out into the fields. It hadn't tired her much, she'd been so big and strong. But it tired her now to remember it. To remember, too, the three good cows that had had to be killed, the crops in the flats that had been spoiled by the creek's overflowing.

And the time of the potatoes. It had been just as she'd told John, her strength had gone to the potatoes instead of Phil. Oh, she'd given

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everything to the farm—milking, threshing, fussing with baby chickens and calves, baking for pickers—what had there been left for Philip?

She looked down curiously at her hands. It seemed queer that those big, ugly hands had ever held a baby. And yet the remembrance of that little black-haired warm bundle in her arms brought sudden tears stinging to her eyes. He had been so little trouble—Phil!

And Margaret. Margaret hadn't been like Phil. Right from the first she had been pretty, quick-tempered, firm for her rights! It hadn't been so easy to run things after Margaret came. But, still, when Margaret had been ten days old, and Steve had fallen and twisted his arm, she had got up and taken charge of things. Yes, the farm had been a part of her, right from the first. And she was too old to run it—too old?

She rose in sudden anger, and went into the house.

"You're just mad, Jen Culliton, because you think Marg'ret's trying to boss you!" she said aloud. She took down her daughter Margaret's letter from the shelf.

"You've just got to get a man to run the place on shares, Mother!" Margaret's rather charac-

terless sentences ran. "It doesn't look right for you, at your age, to be going out in the fields like any common day laborer. In overalls, too! Honestly, Mother, you ought to have more pride!"

Jen's mouth became stern. Pride? Pride? Hadn't it been pride that had made her put on the overalls in the first place? Somehow, she couldn't bear it to have Margaret talk to her this way. If Phil had asked it of her . . . but Phil wouldn't have. Phil and she were too alike at heart, for all he was an artist and a dreamer. Margaret would never wonder about that cruel, snowbound winter when her father had had pneumonia and the doctor hadn't got through till Steve was right at death's door. Of course she was too little then to really remember it, but, somehow, Jen felt, Phil had always known just how it had been.

How the farm had had to go on, even then. How terrible it had been. Jen hadn't slept for eight nights and her cheerfulness had come to be put off and on like a mask for the children and Steve. But the children had had their meals and had been reasonably happy and she'd been with Steve when he needed her. The next-door neighbor had come in to milk; but, the night after

Steve died, the snow was so bad that the neighbor couldn't come, and she had done the milking herself. Afterward, in the first days of her aloneness, her strength had seemed gone out of her. She had felt as if a wall shut her in from the rest of the world and no comfort or help could pass it. But there the children had been, making their demands upon her. She had picked up the threads and gone on. No, Margaret couldn't know all about that, of course, but she ought to have *felt* some of it!

Jen's eyes blurred a little as she looked down again at Margaret's letter.

"Ed wants to know why you don't come up and live with us, anyway, Mother? He's talked about it a lot, and there's no need for you to work."

A dull red surged into Jen's face. No need? *No need?* They thought her life done, did they?

"I've written Zeb Plants—"

Jen felt new anger. How dared Margaret? Didn't Margaret even have any feeling about other hands taking the reins of the farm that had meant her livelihood for so long? Was this farm just like any other to her? Was her mother just any old woman? Couldn't Margaret remember anything of that first bleak pull when she had put

aside the longing for Steve's dependency upon her and for his silent self, as far as was possible, and lived for her and Philip? Couldn't Margaret remember how she'd pulled this farm out of its failures to the first worth-while successes? Couldn't she remember all the things that had been needed for school—how they'd been dragged out of the very soil? Or had she always seen only the things themselves? Philip . . . he'd see . . . but Philip was so far away! He couldn't know what Margaret was trying to do to her and she couldn't tell him! If he were only here—he'd see, Philip, the dreamer!

She had sent them both off to school when a year at school meant a good many hundreds of hours of back-breaking, sweating labor. She hadn't begrudged one weary hour of it. Philip had become an architect. Jen was glad, somehow, that he had not chosen farming. She'd clung to the farm, herself, made a good living out of it, but she wouldn't have wanted Phil here. Still . . . he'd see . . . he'd see! She remembered the night of his graduation, how he'd put his arms around her and put his cheek against hers . . . there'd been tears on his face. He knew how hard the years had been!

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She had made a man of herself. She'd had to. Folks sometimes laughed when they saw her coming with her mannish stride down the road, and she knew it, but, in spite of the laughter, there was no one who did not respect her. She sensed that, too, and that was, in a way, her reward. She was unalterably square in all her dealings and there wasn't a man about who didn't like to do business with her. Jen had felt a certain just pride in her success, but now . . . *now!*

Was she old? Margaret, Zeb, the Judge . . . her own discontent . . . didn't they prove it? But . . . live with Ed and Margaret . . . give up the farm? Never!

But that was the beginning. Jen meant that "never," but Margaret came down and made arrangements with Zeb. Margaret gave Jen some gingham dresses . . . she talked to the neighbors, made her own mother seem silly to go on digging away when she had means enough to quit! Jen pretended she hadn't given up. But, in her own mind, she knew at last that she had.

"But I'll never sell the place!" she vowed. "Margaret can make me into a nice old lady—but she can't take the farm away from me!"

Probably Margaret couldn't have done it some

years. But Jen was tired that fall, really tired, and she'd never before admitted that she was tired even to herself. The fact of that persistent tiredness constantly backed Margaret up. But letting go did to Jen what it has to many another. It brought discontent and a sense of failure and a consciousness of personal faults and frailties and age.

For the first time in years, she was acutely aware of herself. She began to look at herself with the eyes of her neighbors and children. A brusque, busy, somewhat ungainly woman, without any of the small graces and charms of femininity. A woman people laughed at and treated like a man. Children far away and glad to be away. Nothing really left to live for.

She, who had always refused to worry, began to worry about her feelings. She couldn't understand why she felt so good for nothing and worn out when she'd always met each day with such eagerness for its tasks. She tried to sleep later mornings, but she couldn't do it after such a long-established habit of rising at five. She began to have little ailments—backaches, a difficulty in breathing when she climbed the stairs, an occasional headache. Margaret's husband's old invi-

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tation to live with them began to pull temptingly, but she still had sense enough to know that she mustn't yield to it. Margaret was too fussy about her house, she was the kind who didn't like children and probably wouldn't ever have any. She played bridge nearly every afternoon and danced nearly every night. Jen knew that eventually it would get on her nerves.

The winter, that third after the children went, dragged. It was a snow-bound winter like that other cruel one. She thought of Steve more than ever, and hugged her precious few moments of romance to her in a sentimental way unlike her. She borrowed what books she could and read a great deal. It was rather slow work, for she had always been too busy with life itself to spend much time on paper lives. She liked it a little, though only occasionally, when a line about something familiar, such as the smell of the new-turned earth or the glory of a wild cherry tree in May, came to her eyes, did she really have a deep pleasure in reading. Philip sent her a little book once on her birthday. *Songs of a Farmhand*—little homely, everyday verses, and those it somehow comforted and calmed her to read.

As it came near her fifty-fourth birthday, her

discontent and restlessness became intense. She was conscious from morning to night that she was old, ugly and unwanted. Even the oversight of the spring sowing didn't seem to satisfy, perhaps because Zeb seemed to think it *his* job this year. There had always been a pleasant feeling of anticipation for the planting and a warmth of satisfaction when it was done.

"Don't know what I'm doing it for, year after year," she said to herself. "Nobody to work for, only myself! Guess they'll do it after a while—make me sick enough of this place to sell it!"

She didn't sell it, but she didn't nag at Zeb Plants to rush with the plowing, and the sight of violets in the orchard left her cold.

"Just getting old!" she said to herself.

She thought a great deal about her looks.

"I'm ugly as an old stump fence," she would say. "Skin like leather and freckles standing out like warts. And look at them hands—look like a couple hams! Guess I'll have to go to one of these manicures, or whatever you call 'em, that Marg'ret sets such store by. Mebbe they could bleach 'em out and shrink 'em a little and *iron* some of the knots out of 'em!" She gave a grim

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little laugh. "Looks like I'd been a farmhand all my life instead of Mrs. Steve Culliton!"

She determined to have a real good new dress for best, one with style to it. Miss Prescott, in the village, made it. It was blue taffeta and it cost the price of six dozen eggs for every yard of it. She felt like an old fool when she went for the fittings, but she was determined to have it. Maybe Margaret would ask her for a spring visit and she'd want something decent to wear. But when she got it home and tried it on before the long mirror in the old Culliton spare room, she flushed with shame at her frivolous desires. In the first place, the dress hadn't been made to fit the dignified bigness of Jen. But Jen thought that it was only that she was too old and coarse to wear it. Her hands hung below the three-quarter length sleeves, big and brown and awkward. Her sandy hair stood up grotesquely above the girlish ruffle at the blue taffeta neck. She took off the dress with angry, humiliated jerks, put it away in the spare-room clothespress and shut the door upon it.

"Don't know what I wanted to waste my money for—don't aim to go anywhere this summer," she said, irritated at her extravagance. "Anyway,

my old black's good enough for another year or two!"

She went out and chopped a few slabs of wood to let off her feelings. She looked ruefully down at her hands when she was through.

"Wasn't meant for nothing else!" she addressed them.

But she didn't want 'nothing else.' She continued to yearn for something continually; she didn't know just what.

As it came near her birthday, she began to wonder what the children would send her. They always remembered it, though sometimes she wished they hadn't. Margaret was so very practical in her gifts. A gingham dress, a box of lisle stockings, a vacuum cleaner that worked by hand (Jen was not acquainted with electricity). The vacuum cleaner Jen gave a snort at. "It'll save you lots of work," Margaret wrote. "Humph!" said Jen. She put it out in the back shed and kept on using the broom. But, of course, she'd have felt hurt if they hadn't remembered her and she admitted it, shamedly.

She had a desire this year to have the children there on her birthday, but put the idea away as silly. Margaret was so busy with her bridge and

all, and Philip was 'way out there in Colorado. Maybe Margaret would ask her up. But she knew well enough Margaret wouldn't. Margaret asked her for a week in midsummer, and she'd probably go, as she had last summer, right in the middle of her busy season. But Margaret wouldn't be asking her just because it was her birthday, or because she was homesick to see her. She put away her disloyal thoughts of Margaret impatiently. Margaret was a good enough girl; it was probably her own, Jen's, fault that she wasn't quite so unselfish as she might be. Maybe Jen hadn't given enough of her time to bringing her up. But she didn't see how that could have been helped much, when there'd been the farm to run and clothes to make and two hungry little bodies to fill.

It was different with Philip. You didn't expect so much of a son's life after he was married. You felt that he really wasn't yours any more, just as you felt that you had a right always to keep your daughter more or less under your wing. She felt that maybe Philip wasn't doing any too well, though his letters never said so. It was as like Philip not to complain as it was like Margaret always to boast a little. Philip didn't write

so very often, not so often as Margaret, but Jen read his letters many times when they did come. Daphne, Phil's wife, always wrote a friendly little note across the foot of the page. She had seen Phil's wife but once, at Phil's wedding. Just a little girl, Daphne, but Jen had, in her stiff, unbecoming dress, been very shy of her. But Daphne seemed a friend now. Jen wondered what Phil would send. Last year it had been the little book of poems and the year before that a small, odd pin.

The orchard and the wild cherry trees up on the side hill were going to blossom for her birthday. Jen felt a curious resentment against all nature—for being so glad and beautiful when she was not. She worked extra hard, feeling a savage delight in making her hands rougher and redder. She invented an errand at a neighbor's and walked down there, in her man's regalia, striding along with an extra swing, just to show the world at large that she didn't care if she was big and ugly. She laughed loudly at some joke the neighbor told, and she laughed again on the way home when she thought of how they might be laughing at her.

On her birthday morning, she got up at five, as

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usual. She felt that bothersome ache in her back that she'd had so often lately.

"Old, worn-out horse!" she said to herself in the glass. Then, just to spite age, she put on her work clothes. "Only dress I got I look good in," she said. "Going to wear it to-day, Margaret or no Margaret! Zeb's gone to town and there ain't any one to boss me! Going to plant potatoes, that's what I'm going to do! I ain't on the shelf yet! Maybe I ain't fit to play bridge at one of Margaret's affairs, but I reckon I can still plant potatoes!"

She went down to the orchard and broke off two branches of blossoms. She tied one to each handle of the planter.

"Got to fix up a little on my birthday," she said. She put a stiff-stemmed spray in her sandy hair and laughed about it, a little mirthlessly. She pulled a straw hat down tight over it and went out to the north field, which she was going to put into potatoes this year.

"Guess I look like one of these daybutants Marg'ret's always telling about, now!" she said grimly.

But her flare of rebellion was short-lived. She walked through the soft dirt, planting steadily

and evenly, but her mind was a turmoil of middle-aged, self-pitying thoughts.

“Worked like a nigger all my life . . . nobody cares . . . nobody to work for now. Marg’ret ought to be ashamed of herself, not to have any babies! Wish I could have had more; if I could’ve had eleven like Mother did, I guess there’d be anyway one of ’em to come home on my birthday! Cheated out of Steve and babies and everything. I ought to have had a big brood of ’em, big and strong as I am! Suppose I could go over to Rosie’s to dinner. Won’t, though! She laughs at me, and she always thinks I’ve come to nag her over that money I lent her. Goodness knows, she’s welcome to it—she ought to know her own sister better’n that! Don’t feel as if I know anybody or anybody knows me. Don’t even feel like going to church these days. Just want what you can give—that’s all; young folks with ambition and old folks’ money. All they’re after. I’m sick of it! Come to my house for quiltings just because I’ve got the biggest settin’ room. Then laugh at me for looking like a man! Ain’t going to have it any more. I’ll sell the place, that’s what I’ll do, sell it and settle down to be a respectable old lady! I been a fool to

want to hang onto it! Time I quit, muscles aching like all get-out just over a little patch of potatoes! I'll sell it to-day. I'll go down and see the Judge—find out if Eph still wants it! I'll get me a little house in Claremont and take to embroiderin' and go to a movie now and again!" She flared up in a final rebellion. "Shan't even finish this row of potatoes. I'm plumb sick of the farm 'n everything!"

She turned the horse barnward.

"If I've got to be old, I'm going to be old in peace without all these chores to do!" she said, as if those very chores had not been all that had saved her from utter vanquishment for months!

She put on her black silk dress, out of respect for the town's opinion of the Judge. Once she thought she'd wait for the R. F. D. man. There'd be something from the children . . . but, no, she wouldn't. Just something because they thought they had to. Well, it was that way with Marg'ret anyway. She wouldn't wait. Ugly old place, even the children wouldn't come home to it! She'd get rid of it to-day.

She had a little moment of regret when she drove off. She could see the orchard so clearly, all pink in the May sunshine. She remembered

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how Philip had liked to play there in the spring.

It was a warm day and the black silk was uncomfortable and hot. She hoped the Judge wasn't home, but he was.

"Well, John," she said, when she faced him in his little cluttered office (she wondered why that difficulty in breathing should attack her now), "well, John, I suppose Eph's bought a place before now, hasn't he?"

"Why, no, Jen! You ready to sell yours?"

"Guess I am. Sick of working, John!"

"H'm! Can't see you sitting down and folding your hands, Jen!"

"Well, I aim to, for a spell. I feel age creepin' up on me, like I told you, and there don't seem to be no satisfaction in hanging onto the place just to see Zeb Plants running it! Can't put the gump-tion into splittin' wood that I used to, John!" She laughed a little at herself.

"Well, Eph'll be glad to get the place. He's always had his eye on it. Felt ashamed when I asked you about it before. It won't seem natural to see any one else there. But, of course, you know what you want to do. Eph's in town to-day, I think. Want me to call him in? He was over across the street a while ago."

"Yes." Her loud, cheerful voice was somewhat subdued and a little grim. "Might as well get it fixed up if he's willing to buy."

The Judge looked at her curiously, but he called up the store and asked for Eph.

"Well, now, that's too bad! Eph went home about half an hour ago! But if you want to leave a message, I'll see Eph when he comes in with the milk in the morning. Guess he'd be glad to move before the summer's work gets under way. Sure you want to give up the place, Jen? Going with one of the children?"

"No, I don't aim to. You'd ought to know that two women-folks like Marg'ret and me couldn't keep house together. And I wouldn't ask of a daughter-in-law what I wouldn't of a daughter!"

The Judge laughed and shook his head.

"Independent as ever, Jen! Wish the town had a few men with backbones as stiff as yours!"

Jen got up to go. "Well, you see Eph and tell him I'll see him before the week's up. I won't make the terms so's he can't carry it. Everything's in good shape. He can take the horses and cows or not, just as he wants. Good-by, John."

She went out as abruptly as she'd come in. With no known reason she was suddenly in a panic of haste to get home. She unhitched the horse from in front of Cather's store and started up the road toward the farm. She had a queer feeling as if she were some one else. Jen Culliton would not have parted with the farm so abruptly. Yet she felt it was as final as if the deed were in Eph's hands.

A cool breeze sprang up from the south. It felt good against her hot face. She wondered why her hands shook on the reins. She was certainly old . . . it was time she quit.

She noticed that the lilac was showing purple. She remembered when she and Steve had set it out. That had been one of her moments of romance.

There were two letters in the mail box. Mr. Stiles had put two packages up on the porch. She put the horse up and sat down on the front steps, regardless of her silk dress. She looked at the letters a minute, but put them aside. Margaret's package first. [Three summer nightgowns, plain and substantial. Jen put them back into the box, folded neatly into their original creases. She felt a shame at her ungratefulness but, some-

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how, she hadn't wanted nightgowns. Philip's package was flat and square, bigger than his usual gifts. It was of wood, carefully put together, and there was excelsior within. At last she came to it.

A picture! At first, as she looked at it, she thought it queer and plain. Just a woman, a big, homely woman in a blue dress like calico, her sleeves pushed up on her arms, her hair pulled back with old-fashioned plainness. In her arms was a baby, curly-haired and beautiful. The woman's big hand showed against the child's dress, worn and big and ugly. Ugly, that was Jen's first thought of the picture. And then she saw it wasn't. It was beautiful. There was something about the woman's eyes . . . and her arms about the tired baby. Jen looked at it a long time. She did not put it aside like the night-dresses. Presently, with it still on her knee, she reached for Philip's letter. It was longer than usual:

DEAREST MOTHER: I'll bet the orchard's all in blossom to-day, isn't it? I thought I could get a whiff of it as I sat down to write. Is the lilac out yet? We have two pots of daffodils in blossom.

I've been homesick lately. We thought, Daphne and I, that we would surely be with you for this birthday, but we couldn't quite fetch it. We were going to surprise you. But, the way things have turned out, we've decided on something else. There's a baby coming in August, and we've been wondering if you couldn't come, Mother? Do you suppose you could? I know you have a lot of responsibility and work there and I hate to ask it, but we're so far from home, and with this coming on, we feel like two helpless children. I don't like to have Daphne go through it without any of the women of the family at hand. There's just her aunt, and Daphne doesn't want her—she's an old maid and fussy.

"I'd feel sure it would all come out right if your mother'd only come," Daphne says. "She's so strong and dependable, and I'd feel the baby was always all right with her!" And that's the way I feel, too. Maybe you don't want to be leaned on—you've certainly had your share of it—but we sure do want you, and it would be awfully good of you. Daphne hasn't been very well. I've thought sometimes that, if you should come, I'd let Daphne go back with you after she got her

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strength back. It's such a strength-giving old place, with you there at the helm. I think, from something she said once, that she'd like to. Well, we'll talk it over if you come.

Did the picture come all right? Madonna pictures never look real to me, but this one did. It looked like you, somehow, stopping in the midst of the washing, to comfort us. I had to get it.

We'll be anxious for your answer.

Love,

PHIL.

Across the bottom, in Daphne's pretty writing: "I'm wishing I were your 'really' daughter, so you *couldn't* say 'No!'"

Jen sat still there in the May sweetness, the letter tight in her big hands. She looked down at the picture again. She looked like that—to him? Then Daphne's little sentence smiled wistfully up at her again. Suddenly the old Jen Culliton was back again, as though she had never been away, the Jen Culliton who never thought of herself, but gave what she had of strength and service, cheerfully and sanely. But her eyes were wet, a rare thing with Jen, when she got to her feet.

JEN CULLITON

She got up and went into the house. She put the picture by her place at the table where she could look at it again at supper time. Philip's letter, too. Margaret's she scanned hastily. She went upstairs and hurried off the black silk. Her work clothes went on.

"Guess I can get those potatoes in before dark, if I hurry," she said.

Consciousness of age slipped from her. She paid no heed to the redness or the bigness of the hands that buckled the belt of the khaki suit. There was a lot to do if she got ready to go away in August. She had let things run a little slack lately. Hired help never did do things right unless you kept right at their elbow. She'd have to see that the house was thoroughly cleaned if Daphne was coming back with her. Maybe she'd get a new hammock, and a nice easychair. The old baby quilts and things must be brought down out of the attic and fixed up for use. She went downstairs and out the back door hurriedly. She couldn't waste any time now. She walked with a brisk stride, but was not conscious that she did.

Halfway to the barn she paused, in sudden terror of remembrance. She turned back. She called Claremont.

JEN CULLITON'S HANDS

"Hello, hello, Claremont? Give me the Judge's office, please. Hello—that you, John? This is Jen. You called up Eph yet, John? Well, you don't need to. I've changed my mind. I feel spryer than I did this morning and I don't aim to sell. Goin' to keep on workin' it myself, you say? I certainly am—except for a little spell this summer when I'm goin' to be *wanted* elsewhere. Good-by, John!"

She strode out and up to the north field, big and angular and perhaps a little ridiculous, but no one, seeing her face, would have dreamed of ridiculing her. It was beautiful.

CHAPTER II

JEN CULLITON, TRUSTEE

JEN came back from Philip's with peace in her heart. It had been a long trip and a hard trip for Jen, unused to traveling, but it had been worth it. Philip's son had been Philip over again, only she had had time to love the new Philip. It was very sweet. And she had not had to excuse herself to Daphne's friends as she did to Margaret's. Daphne seemed proud of her. She had hoped to bring Daphne back with her but, after all, Daphne hadn't had the strength for it. She promised to come in the late fall or by next spring, anyway. Yes, Jen had peace within her when she reached home.

But peace is a fragile thing, and Jen's was only too brief. The telegram came one raw March night and there was never another raw day after that when the awfulness of her grief did not come back to Jen unbearably. *Her son was dead.* She didn't go to Daphne because Daphne said not to, but she thought Daphne would come to her. She held her sandy head high and no one could give

her sympathy. Day after day, she went about her farm in her ridiculous man's attire, overseeing, planning, working. But the significant part of her mind was somewhere else, constantly groping, willing itself to touch again somehow, if only for a second, the mind of her son. Night after night she lay awake, wide-eyed, her big body tense with a misery so deep that any little soul would have been crushed under it. She was waiting.

When the letter came at last, asking that Daphne might come, Jen was shaken with relief. This, she thought, with a hushed thankfulness within, was Phil's message to her.

Then Daphne was there, so young and wistful and still and broken . . . so unlike the Daphne who had always been fluttering off to laughter . . . that Jen's empty heart opened its doors to her with a passion of pitying welcome. Jen, for all her brusqueness was very tender with hurt and helpless small things. Once she'd come upon a little thrush, out of its nest.

"Drat you—pesky little thing! Can't you stay under your mother's wings till your pin feathers is growed?" Her voice had been impatient but her big rough hands had been gentle and reassuring.

And, when she took Daphne into her arms that first day, it was as if she had said, "There, there, now—you're lost; you've fallen out of your nest. I know all about it, child! But I'm here . . . I'll help you in again. I'm a big, ugly thing, but I won't hurt you. I'll watch over you!"

In reality she said almost nothing at all. But they were, nevertheless, very close those first few days.

It was not until later that Jen's wordlessness began to count against her. She had not needed to talk at first. There had been a binding thread that first night that made words unnecessary. And the baby, so like that other small Philip out of the long ago! The baby was there always, filling the chinks in the conversation with baby chatter, proving by his sameness that that other Philip had lately been among them.

The first weeks were very sweet to Jen, in spite of the hurt, sore place in her heart. It seemed to her Daphne was glad to be there, was finding peace again. Jen watched over her like a fussy mother hen. If Daphne washed the dishes, Jen shoved her aside when she came to the tins. If Daphne brought the potatoes from the cellar, Jen took the dish and the knife from her lap. If

Daphne got the broom, Jen would take it from her, indulgently chiding.

"Oh, I want to help!" Daphne said once. "Let me do *something!*"

But Jen, greedy for the great joy of being able to serve some one dear to her, only laughed good-naturedly and told her that when she got up to a hundred and twenty pounds, maybe she'd let her tote a broom once in a while.

Jen put up a hammock between the maple and the house, and when she looked out and saw that lovely bronze-crowned head with Philip's dark curls cuddled close to it, the hammock swaying softly beneath the blue sky, a healing something pushed away the lump from her throat and the smart of unshed tears from her eyes.

Margaret had come and cried for three days, steadily, after Daphne arrived. Daphne did not cry. For all her soft, little butterfly ways, she had an amazing strength and courage. She even laughed with the baby, a laugh sometimes heavy with heartbreak, but a laugh, nevertheless. She carried her small, square chin high and Jen felt a queerly close kinship to her, bred of that very courage.

But they didn't talk about it. Therein lay the

trouble that came finally to stand like a wall between them. Conscientiously brave, they did not steer away from Philip. But, oh, the things they didn't say! His name—yes, that came in often—but what about all the little things that caught at their hearts in jaggedly tearing memories? What about the swift smile of whimsical cheer that lighted Philip's sober face at oddly unexpected moments? What about his way of making up absurd little rhymes whenever some household problem had to be solved? What about the great courage with which the little boy his father used to call "chicken hearted" had gone out?

All the little things that make the midnight hours so endless, these they kept locked tight and hid the key. It didn't matter at first. They never really felt differently, but their silence began to say at last that they did.

And the one time Jen did speak a little of Philip, she said something that intensified a thousandfold the trouble her quiet had made. There had been a goodly sized check for potatoes.

"Used to feel kind of set-up when the crops turned out good," she said. "Don't any more. Used to think maybe Philip would let me help him a little. He was always such an independent

little rascal, though. Never let me, once, after he got his schooling. I don't know what I'm saving for!" Her voice was a little gray and tired.

She did not realize how Daphne might construe her words. She had felt at that moment such a tide of sweeping loneliness for the gay artist Philip, who had never, through all his dreaming, asked aught of any one. But it was soon after that that she noted a change in her daughter-in-law.

Daphne had been an art student when she married Philip. She got out now some of her materials and tried to work. She had hoped to do something in the line of magazine illustrations. But she hadn't studied enough. After she saw that it wouldn't mean anything in the way of money for the present, she put the things away.

Jen had smiled tenderly to herself, thinking it was good she had found an interest, and proud, too, of her ability. When the things did not appear again, she wondered about it but she did not quiz. It was not her way. Then she noted more clearly the change in Daphne. There was a restlessness about her, a straightness of the lips, an increased quietude, a deeper wistfulness.

One day a letter came for Daphne from Den-

ver, where Philip and Daphne had lived. When Daphne read it, Jen happened to be there and she noted, with a premonitory frightened clutch at her heart, the swift wave of crimson, and the sudden whiteness afterward.

"Well, there's a job for me at last!" Daphne said, with almost gaiety in her voice, but none in her eyes. "I can have a place in the library back home after—after February!"

"Land sakes, you've *got* a job, child! Guess it'll keep you busy looking after the baby for some time yet!"

Daphne hadn't answered. Again that frightened clutch. Was she getting homesick? Was she tired of the life here?

Daphne did not speak of the place in the library for a long time, but she grew, day by day, farther away from Jen. And yet her eyes had in them a constant, wistful question. Jen saw it but could not read it. Did it say—"I want to get away . . . why won't you let me go?" Or did it say—"Why can't I stop remembering?" Or did it say—"Don't you see I can't stand this ugly, hard kind of a life?"

Jen began to dread the setting in of winter. Alone, cooped up in two rooms beside the stoves

—Daphne, discontented, lonely—the precious sense of having a daughter dimmed. Then suddenly winter was there—a tunnel to the chicken coop; five-foot drifts out by the barn, frost thick each morning on the window panes, lonely creak of pines, heavy-laden, in the grove above the house.

Jen had thought to piece a quilt when the crops were out of the way. But she couldn't do it, sitting there beside Daphne, with nothing to bear the brunt of the conversation except little Philip. They were shut in, two inarticulate women, and there seemed no getting out for them. Jen put aside the quilt and spent two puttering days cleaning cupboards.

Daphne was working on some fine embroidery. One day she asked, "Do you suppose you could sell things like this down in Claremont?"

"Why, mebbe," Jen answered. "But I don't suppose any amount of it. Most of the folks in town are retired-like and spend their time at such things themselves. The rest wouldn't put the money into it. You thinkin' of settin' up in the embroidery business?" Her dry tone precluded the possibility of the thing as serious. "You put on that nightgown yourself, come sum-

mer. Ain't any one in Claremont could wear such do-dabs like you!"

Daphne went up to her room right after that and when she came down a few minutes afterward Jen saw that her eyes were red. She had never seen Daphne cry and she was frightened. She came then near to the truth.

"The child wants money!" she said to herself. Queer she hadn't thought of it before! Only, Daphne had so few chances to spend money, and she always seemed to have plenty. Jen knew there had been some insurance, but perhaps it hadn't been much. She slipped a bill into Daphne's flat little purse that night, but the next day she found it on her dresser. Nothing was said about it. But even then, Jen, because of her very love for Daphne, did not see. She gave with such a big, ungrudging heart. She did see, though, that day by day Daphne grew thinner and whiter and more wistful. Jen wanted to take her into her arms, as she did baby Philip . . . and ease her hurt by letting her feel her own hurt . . . only, when folks get grown, of course they don't do those things.

It came to late January. Jen saw that Daphne was fixing over some of her clothes—her plainer things, tailored skirts and simple blouses.

"It's the library job!" Jen thought in dismay. One night Daphne confirmed the thought.

"Marjory writes that she can let me have a couple of rooms with her," she said, too casually, at the supper table. Jen saw that the slim hand that reached for the teacup was shaking. She turned toward her fiercely.

"Don't tell me you're going to take that baby out west to live in a boarding house! I should think you'd have more sense 'n that!" Jen was sharp in the bitterness of her hurt.

"But I—I have to do *something!*"

"*Do* something? Well, don't you work day and night for *him*? Guess you'll make out to keep busy!"

"But—"

"But—*fiddlesticks!* Put such notions out of your head!"

She got up and began clearing the table noisily. But, in the night, she woke up and began to think. Thinking was laborious business with Jen. She was more used to doing.

"What got into me—jumping at her like that last night? Never had nerves before. What makes 'em all frazzled now? Ain't she got a right to go back out west if she wants to? She

ain't been contented since—since before Thanks-givin'. Wonder if it's too strange for her here? Wonder . . . maybe she gets lonesome for folks—and books! I'll get some more books from John Reynolds. Maybe my ways rub her edge-ways—she's so kind of fine!"

Her face grew hot there alone in the night.

"I'd ought to take more pains settin' the table . . . guess I talk kind of common, too. Maybe she's worried about money—guess she knows there's a plenty, though, plenty for us women and a baby. Maybe she's working too hard . . . but I try not to let her . . . I beg her and beg her! It ain't work anyway—it ain't work. *What is it?* There, I just go round in a circle when I try to think! *Oh, Lord, don't let her go away from me!*

"Ain't got no right to say that. Don't know why I should keep her if she'd be more content away. She ain't got a selfish bone in her body—she knows it'll hurt me and she's afraid to go. I've got to let her—I've got to make it easy for her. Ain't she give me most five months of her? Just selfish—"

Suddenly, through her misery and puzzled loneliness, she seemed to see Philip smile, the

smile that seemed to say he understood things she didn't, yet loved her better for her lack of understanding. It comforted her. Without her thoughts taking on the form of words, she knew she had somehow found strength to let Daphne go, to ease her departure. She climbed heavily out of bed, hurried on her clothes with cold fingers. It was a still morning—gray with coming snow. Daphne had already gone down stairs.

Jen, embarrassed at going down late, made an unusual bustle about getting breakfast. Daphne scarcely touched her oatmeal. Almost overnight Jen seemed to see an added frailty. Then, through the living-room doorway, she saw the white of a letter propped against a book, ready for posting. There was no doubt in Jen's mind as to what that letter said.

Though she had a roaring wood fire in the kitchen stove, she felt suddenly cold. She fetched the old red woolen fascinator that hung behind the kitchen door and put it about her shoulders. She sugared Philip's oatmeal for the second time. She got up again, trying desperately to swallow the choking lump in her throat, and put another stick of wood in the stove, though it was so full already that the addition bulged the lid upward.

She brought out the chicken feed, mixing in the hot water vigorously. Daphne got up from the table.

"Let me feed the chickens!" she said suddenly.

"No, no—you set still! I'm used to it. There's the cows and the horses to feed, too. Zeb can't get over till kind of late, he said."

"No—I want to. I want to get out a little while!"

Jen looked around quickly and then away again. She knew that stifling, imprisoned feeling that came after thinking and thinking.

"All right," she said briefly. "Here's hot water for the water dishes and here's the feed. Give 'em a couple of dippers full of grain, too. You know where the grain box sets. Melt the ice in the water dish so's it'll dump out first. Bundle up good! Here's my arctics—don't get lost in 'em! You know about the horses and cows, I guess. Here, put this fascinator 'round your neck!" She tied it clumsily but securely beneath the collar of the old red mackinaw Daphne had put on, so that the collar stuck up in a grotesque line of armament. Daphne's small white face was almost lost.

Jen turned to the dishes with a curious sick

feeling. As soon as Daphne got back she'd say something, let her know it would be all right for her to go. But, before that, Judge Reynolds came, his errand a miraculous reprieve. He pounded on the door with a suddenness that frightened Jen, absorbed in her thoughts. She hurried to the door.

"Why, John Reynolds, what you doing up in this neck of the woods?"

"Business, Jen!" The Judge stamped the snow from his feet, brushed his shoulders with an awkward, backward sweep of the arms and came in, spreading his hands gratefully to the warmth of the kitchen range. The Judge was a kindly but pompous man when in town. With Jen, who had sat next him in school, his pomposity disappeared.

"Have to set in the kitchen, John. Other room fire hasn't got to going good yet. S'pose your judgeship can stand it?" Her voice was dryly friendly, but her thoughts were still with the girl out in the barn.

"Guess so, Jen. Guess so! H'lo, Tiddlywinks!" He lifted Philip, squealing joyously, to the ceiling.

"Must be awful important business takes you out this early," Jen reminded him.

"Well, 'tis." The Judge sat down in a comfortable chair, put his feet on the hearth. "How'd you like to go into politics, Jen?"

Jen stared a moment, then laughed shortly.

"Me? Politics? Mebbe I'm the man of this ranch, but I ain't aimin' to run the government yet awhile! Good job for the men, but women-folks has their job cut out for 'em elsewhere—taking care of their house and children and such. Kind of smudgy business, anyhow!"

"Oh, I don't know! That depends, I guess, upon who's doing it. Wasn't going to ask you to run for president, anyhow, Jen. It won't interfere with your housekeeping, I guess. You've raised your children and Zeb does pretty well with the farm chores, doesn't he? I want you to run against Nate Comstock for school trustee. Election's the first Tuesday in March."

"School trustee—*me?*"

"Yes, you, Jen. You know Nate's had the say-so in this district for years and he's meaner and more grasping than the Old Nick! Everybody hates him, but everybody's afraid of him. The other trustees say yes and no, just like he does. You know it, as well as I do. And that good-for-nothing nephew of his that's taught here

four years—spoiling the manners and morals of all the young 'uns in this district! Folks pay tuition down in Claremont sooner than let him have the teaching of their children. And well they may! Time for a clean-up, and some of the neighbors spoke of you. Of course *they* wouldn't come—afraid of Old Nate! But I'm not—and you're not either!"

"Well, hardly!" Jen's voice was dry.

"Always stood on your own two feet, haven't you, Jen?"

"If I ain't, 't isn't because the Lord didn't make 'em big enough!"

"Always did, anyway. Guess you had to . . . took a pretty up-and-coming girl to manage all those brothers and sisters of yours. Eleven of you, wasn't it? Didn't see you back down any in all Steve's hard luck either, nor after he went. It's took a heap of gumption to get this farm to paying and educate the children as you have!"

"H'mph! Not a case of gumption—case of have to! Had to look lively for your bread and potatoes those days." Jen's voice was a little flat and tired suddenly.

"Well, you got them—that's the main point. And the neighbors know it. They know you're

free from debt and they know your spine's stiffer'n the common run of spines. They just need a leader and they'll break away from Nate, fix up the schoolhouse with some paint and new blackboards, and get a good teacher in!"

"Well—I say let some of the folks that's got children in school, clean up. I didn't put Nate Comstock in nor yet get under his thumb! I don't see as it's *my* place!" Jen's night of worry put a sudden edge of irritation on her voice.

"I don't know, Jen—I don't know. Hard to tell, sometimes, where our place is. Thought maybe you'd look at it this way. It used to be Philip's school . . . ought to be kept clean as a sort of—memorial!"

There was a hesitancy in his hearty tones. For a second, his figure there in the old red-padded rocker became queerly indistinct before Jen's eyes. She could see Philip trudging down the road, holding Margaret's small hand, their books under his arm.

"Memorial?" she said sharply. "Memorial—to Phil? Ain't a memorial to make you remember? I don't need any. Anyway, I've got one—she's out feeding the hens and things. Memorial? Why, John," she wished she could keep

the gruff, loud tones steady. "Why, John, I remember all right! I remember till I'm almost crazy. Can't eat or sleep. He left her to me—kind of a trustee's job there, too—and I can't make good. Guess I don't need any other job. She's killing herself—remembering!"

"Yes, I know. Seems to me, though, that Philip would have liked it, liked it for her sake. She's only a little girl and 't isn't in the nature of youth to remember too long. Philip would want her happy and she looks made for happiness—yes, love happiness, I mean. No, I'm not being disloyal, Jen—just fair. That's one reason I thought you might do it—for her. You could take her campaigning—just neighboring, I mean—and let her meet the young folks.

"Well, what do you think? Maybe we could get that nephew of Mrs. Will Frazier's to take on the teaching. He's young—and he's a good boy!"

Suddenly Jen could not look at him. They were two frank souls, getting on in years—but for just a second it seemed they'd been too frank. Jen looked out of the kitchen window. Daphne, cheeks a little pink from the cold, was coming up the path from the barn, the water and feed dishes

in her arms, the snow falling softly all about and on her. Jen saw her troubled face clearly. Made for happiness—*that kind of happiness*—of course she was! Jen turned abruptly.

“Guess you’re right, John. Guess you’re right. I’ve thought of all kinds of things—but not that. Queer I didn’t. I’ll take it on—both jobs!”

Daphne came in then.

“Morning!” the Judge said cheerfully. “If you were my girl, I’d make you coast down Rose Hill a couple times every morning to work up some color like that to keep!”

She smiled faintly and bent to unbuckle Jen’s big arctics.

“Well,” he persisted heartily, “you going to help Jen and the youngster campaign?”

Daphne lifted her head quickly.

“Didn’t know Jen had gone in for politics, eh? Jen’s going to be the new school trustee and Tid-dlywinks is going to be first assistant!”

Daphne was standing straight now. She became quite still, her hands lifted to the untying of the red fascinator. Into her eyes had suddenly come a new hope.

“She’ll have to hustle. Election’s in March! Will you drum up votes for her?”

"Yes," said Daphne, with a strange seriousness, "I will!"

The Judge got up to go soon after that. "If you won't ask me to dinner, I might as well mosey along," he said. At the door he chuckled contagiously. "Just as well not to let Old Nate get wind of this," he said. "Make the surprise more pleasant like!"

From that morning on, the old closeness came back. It was, to Jen's uncomprehending mind, like a miracle. Daphne put away her sewing, tore up the letter that had been ready for mailing, became, some days, almost gay. She laughed often with the baby, and it seemed to Jen that a great weight rose from off her heart.

Jen went about her campaigning with a frank humor. They would bundle up, get out the cutter and be off for the day.

"Zeb, you take care of everything to-day!" she'd say; and round-shouldered little Zeb Plants with his red face and very blue eyes, would look at her in surprise. He'd never had much leeway, Zeb.

Jen did not disguise her errand. "Daphne and me have come campaigning!" she'd say. "Trying to do Nate Comstock out of a job!"

The neighbors were glad to see her. They liked her brusque ways and felt a vicarious pride that she'd had the backbone to stand up to Nate. They asked her in, made a fuss over the boy and Daphne. And they all liked Daphne. It wasn't a week till some one invited Daphne to a chicken-pie supper at the Grange hall. Jen accepted for her.

"Course she'll go! The child's shut up, day in, day out, with a cranky old woman! Have to shove her out once in a while or she'll get just like me!"

Daphne went, then, and often in the month that followed. Once or twice the boy up at Frazier's brought her home. He was a good boy, a little nearer Daphne's sort, but when Jen thought of that fine, gay dreamer, Phil, she became unaccountably bleak at heart. Still—to have her near—just to have her near and happy! Jen pushed her own selfishness from her with angry impatience and tried not to be glad when Daphne said she thought Fred a little dull. The days became confused to Jen. Sometimes she had a feeling of failure to Philip, and then again, when Daphne sang a little, she had a warm sense of Phil's approving nearness. Daphne seemed,

all along, queerly tense about election. More than once she asked,

"Do you think the election's sure?"

"Look's like it," Jen said, "'less a lot of 'em get weak-kneed at the last minute. Guess they think even I'd do better 'n Nate!"

"You're so afraid some one 'll think folks like you!" Daphne said with gentle mockery.

But the election became suddenly not so sure. Nate held a mortgage on Lydia Tarbush's place. He tried to put the screws on and Lydia, in an angry flare of desperation, spat out the fact that he wasn't going to run the school much longer, anyhow! He wormed out that it was Jen against him. He came to Jen in a blustering rage. Jen had gone to town.

"Where's Jen?" he demanded truculently of Zeb at the well. Zeb's round shoulders straightened at Nate's tone. Not even Jen could have turned her back upon Nate with more dignity than her man-of-all-work did then. But Nate went on to the house and found Daphne.

"She's gone to town," Daphne told him.

"Well, you can tell her Nate Comstock called, and that she needn't think her petticoats is going to get her a job that's been mine for a consider-

able number of years! You can tell her that for every vote she gets at meeting next Friday night, I'll be darned if I don't get two!"

Daphne shut the door in his face, but, when she told Jen, her voice was broken.

"Why, there, child! 'Tain't a matter to stir you up so, even come I should lose! I've got along without being school trustee for quite a considerable number of years and I guess I could wiggle through the few that's left without its spoiling my happiness!"

Jen was frightened that day to see the old wistful look again in Daphne's eyes.

On Sunday they went to the little church at the Corners. Jen smiled a little wryly on the way home; some eyes hadn't quite met hers in greeting.

"Crookeder 'n a stump fence—human nature," she said once, aloud. "I don't aim to understand it!"

The night of the school meeting came, blustery and cold. Jen looked a little tired when she sat down to supper.

"I'll do the dishes," Daphne said. "You go get dressed."

Jen shook her head. "No, I'm not going. Apt

to make a fool of myself! Guess somebody'll call up and let me know."

After Philip was in bed, they sat by the kitchen stove, tried nervously to sew. Jen had a strange longing to tell Daphne why she had gone into this school business, to ask her plainly if she were going back or not. But only her thoughts asked. They both sat there silently, needles busy, hearts full.

It was near ten when, with a great jangling of sleighbells, the Judge suddenly appeared. He burst in, happy as a boy.

"You put it over, Jen—a landslide! Why in tarnation didn't you come? Folks got up on their seats and yelled! They wanted to come surprise you, only I thought maybe you were sick! None of my business from start to finish, but dog-gone it, I haven't felt so tickled over anything in years! Why—"

He paused suddenly. Daphne had dropped her sewing and, with a little rush, had gone down on her knees before Jen, buried her face in Jen's wide lap and burst into tears.

"Why, there, child! What is it? Don't cry—don't cry so! Tell Jen, can't you? Don't cry, child, don't cry—there, there!"

Suddenly the sobs ceased. Daphne got to her

feet, but stayed there, close to Jen. Before ever she spoke, Jen had a strange assurance that never again would they be other than close.

"Oh, I'm ashamed!" said Daphne in a small voice. "I'm so ashamed! I—I didn't know how much I'd been counting on it!"

"On what?" asked Jen, her voice gentle.

"On the trustee's job. Seemed to me I couldn't go back out there! I thought if you got the place, maybe you'd help me get in as teacher! I *have* taught—two years. I'd study so hard! Oh, do you think—" she flamed up incoherently before the amaze of dawning comprehension in Jen's eyes. "Oh, you didn't make me feel you didn't want me! Ever! You've been so good—but you wouldn't let me help. I couldn't stay on that way. You hate parasites, and so did Phil—and so do I! I couldn't go on using up your living—and there didn't seem to be anything I could do. I thought I'd have to go back out west, to the library. And I couldn't! It seemed as though I just couldn't! The head librarian—I'd be under obligations. He—he likes me—and I was afraid!"

The long silence had broken, as silences are apt to break, before an outsider.

JEN CULLITON, TRUSTEE

"It isn't that I think it would be wrong to marry again, only, when it's myself, it seems different! Why, Phil is *still here!* And somehow he seems nearer, more alive, here where he grew up. I wanted to do something—*something* to carry on his life, and it seemed to me if I could teach in the school where he used to study—have his son there, too, it would be a kind of—of memorial for the folks here who think he—he's *dead*. And I—I suppose I was selfish, too. I wanted Philip to have his father's old room—I wanted to stay here, near you—" Her hand reached out toward Jen.

There was a sudden silence. She looked so little, so valiant, so vision-seeing, standing there looking away somewhere beyond them. Jen's throat felt tight. Now, *now* she could take the child into her arms! But she did not move. It was the Judge who spoke. He put his two hands gently on Daphne's shoulders, as if she were his little girl and he was very proud of her.

"It doesn't seem possible there could be *two* such Culliton women! It sounds like you, Jen, going on after Steve went. I was wrong, all wrong, about Daphne! And you're a good trustee, Jen, *a good trustee!*"

CHAPTER III

JEN'S GIRL

JEN had two years of Philip's wife and Philip's baby. Two years . . . for, after all, Judge Reynolds had been right. Daphne *had* been young, and there was an artist from New Hampshire who'd always loved her. He took her to France. Jen did not feel too hurt, though she missed them terribly. Sometimes she would stop, in the midst of a task, and wonder where in mischief that little rascal Philip had gone, and when realization would come, she would have some bad moments. But she was really glad for Daphne, too. Daphne had given two years, and two years is a long time to youth. And she'd given Jen some precious things to think about, little subtleties of loving that were good to remember. And she wrote often, warm, grateful letters that kept the heart soft.

She was more of a daughter to Jen, even married again, than Jen's own Margaret, and sometimes the truth of that cut into Jen. That fall

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after Daphne went, Jen thought a good deal about Margaret, anyway. Perhaps it was that realization of her difference that did it, perhaps loneliness, perhaps Margaret's letters.

It was October. Indian Summer drifted over the hills and up from the valley to Jen's place and laid upon it the magic that is compounded of chrysanthemums' pungent odor, orchard smells, sun-baked earth perfume, haze shot through with tapestry gleams of sumac crimson, marigold orange, elm-leaf yellow.

It was the time of year that Jen loved best, though once the best-loved time had been spring. But spring was the time of youth and hope, of plowing and planting. Even now, as Jen, big and capable and sure, went out each spring, clad in khaki shirt and trousers, inspecting, planning, preparing, she felt a surge of ambition and hopefulness. But autumn was better.

Her big muscular body, that had carried such burdens of responsibility so willingly through the years, was tired. There were streaks of gray through her sandy hair. There was a peace which comes with the bringing in of the harvest that was very blessed to Jen, and each added year made that peace fuller, more satisfying. The

haymows and silo full, the wheat sold, the rafters spread with drying things, the cans full in the fruit cellar—she could draw a deep breath then and look forward to the winter by the kitchen stove. Alone, yes, but she was not unhappy, except for that little tugging worry about Margaret.

One day she came up from the orchard with a little worried line between her brows. Straight and strong—at the same time homely and beautiful—she strode along beside the fence. She'd had a letter from Margaret that morning, and it was not her usual, fortnightly, dutiful epistle. It stuck in Jen's mind. It was not so much in the difference of content; there were the usual, scrappy bits of information as to her comings and goings: a bridge party at Van Dyne's; she had had six in to dinner; Ed was away for a few days again. Nothing so different, and yet it was all different. There was, to Jen, a discontent flickering through the lines, a restlessness that was almost recklessness. Marg'ret was always restless—but this was different. It troubled Jen.

Margaret was so unlike Jen, caring so much for clothes and the things money could buy, always reaching out after the moon. Oh, she had made

a pretty gesture of the reaching, but it was the discontent itself that was so foreign to Jen. Jen had always been too busy with the present to grasp after the far-away.

And yet, when Margaret had married Ed Kramer, Jen had glowed within, as she would at the unexpected flowering of a plant she had thought was going to run only to leaves. Ed, older than Margaret, steady and jolly and successful, was the kind of a husband she would have chosen. And Margaret loved him. Jen had felt a vast relief, somehow, to know that Margaret *could* love a man like Ed, and a yet vaster relief that Ed was going to take care of Margaret, always. It had been a great disappointment to her that there had not been children. She remembered how eagerly, at first, she had looked forward to the time when she would have Margaret's baby to dress and cuddle. But it never came.

She couldn't understand it. Ed always liked youngsters; and Margaret even when she was a little girl, would play happily for hours with a neighbor's child left in her care.

Jen had never mentioned it to them. It seemed too sacred a thing for even a mother's intrusion.

And, gradually, her disappointment settled into something like resignation, and, of course, she'd had Daphne and Phil's baby.

A red leaf fluttered down from the apple tree at the orchard corner and brushed against Jen's face. She put up one of her big, worn, brown hands to push it away and suddenly, up by the house, she saw Margaret. There was a confused moment of doubting that it could be October. Margaret came from the city every June and spent a week at home; she had never come before in October. But it *was* October and it *was* Margaret.

Dressed in a tweed suit the color of the oak leaves up back of the north lot, a felt hat to match, with a quill of bronze like the bronze of her hair, Margaret was standing still by the back steps, her bag beside her, looking toward Jen. For just an instant Jen had a feeling that Margaret was in some kind of trouble and had come to her mother with it, as if she were a little girl again. It was the first time in years that Jen had had that feeling. It made her queerly unsteady as she met Margaret. Almost instantly the feeling was gone, swept aside by Margaret's cool, amused scrutiny of her mother.

"Mother, why *will* you wear those togs? You look like old Ike Trull!"

"Well, I'd look pretty out picking apples all frilled up with lace!" Her sudden reaction made her sharp. "You most got me once where I thought I was too old for these—but you never will again! I've worn pants out in the field now for quite a few years and I ain't never heard any objections, except from you!"

No, she thought, Margaret didn't need her. She'd got tired out from too many bridge parties and she wanted to rest.

"Oh, the train was so hot and poky! Is there water up in my room? I'm going to wash the cinders off and rest a little. I'm *so* tired!"

Jen felt ashamed of herself at the swift impatience that swept her. Tired—now what under the sun had Margaret done to be "*so* tired!" Jen carried a big pitcher of water up to Margaret's room, opened the window, and moved a chair near it. She was somehow too possessed with impatience to talk. Margaret had flung her hat on a chair, dropped down on the bed and closed her eyes. Jen, looking around at her, found her impatience snuffed out with a queer suddenness.

"It ain't her body that's tired," she thought with tender shrewdness, "it's her heart 'n I dunno but that's the worst kind of tiredness!"

She left the room quietly and went on about her business, but she thought constantly of that face on the pillow—tired, discontented, disillusioned, wistfully lovely.

"Something's terribly wrong!" she said once, to herself.

Margaret came down while Jen got supper on. She had put on a black and white gingham with a big bow at the side, and she looked very young and pretty. She set the table, talking as she did it, fast, and a little nervously.

"Do you remember Lucy Albright? The girl I used to get so furious at because she *wouldn't* lead out trumps? She's left her husband. And they gave *him* the baby—how *could* she give up her baby?" Then, as though it were part of the same topic:

"Mother, these dishes are a disgrace; why don't you use your good ones? They'll last a lifetime, for all you'll use them, and these are a fright. . . .

"Do you remember Mrs. Matthew Palmiter? . . ."

Jen heard her only vaguely. She wondered how Margaret could fill her mind with such useless, trivial thoughts. It was like a shell over the sweet gaiety of her girlhood. And yet, there it was under her words, as it had been behind the sentences of her letter—a kind of recklessness, almost despair. Jen wanted to take her into her arms, let her cry, and she wondered irritably why mothers and daughters get so far away from each other.

It was when they were at the table, Jen with a blue and white apron ludicrously covering the khaki outfit, that Margaret suddenly lost her triviality.

"You might as well know, first as last, Mother, that Ed and I aren't going to stick it out any longer!"

Jen's hand, lifted to pass the jelly, dropped. She felt queerly giddy.

"Stick it out—stick what out?"

"Being married."

There was a long silence, while something tight seemed to clutch around Jen's heart. There was not even a question in her mind but that Margaret meant it. She couldn't even talk about it lightly, she meant it so terribly. Then the tense

moment was gone and Margaret tried, too late, to be casual.

"Oh, it's such a hideous bore! He won't play bridge—I can't sit and read, read, read every night like an old bookworm! He doesn't take any more interest in me and what I do! And if I go out with the crowd, alone, and get criticized, he blames *me*! He's getting gray and old and moss-covered—and I'm young! I *won't* get moss-covered, too! Oh, I'm sick of it all! I guess he'll be glad to be out of it, too!"

Jen spread her bread, but could not eat it. This was only talk, only talk—except for the hint of tears in that first sentence.

"You mean—get a divorce?" Jen tried to be casual, too, but her horror of the institution would not let her get the word divorce out easily.

"Yes—why, *yes*! They will gossip so when it's only a separation!"

Jen had a swift memory of Steve, coming in from the hayfield, lifting Margaret in his strong arms till her curly head touched the ceiling.

"You been Pop's good girl to-day?" he'd always ask. "Margie Pop's dood dirl to-day!" she'd always answer.

"What—what does Ed say about it?"

For the briefest instant Jen saw flicker in and out of Margaret's eyes a flash of real feeling.

"Oh, *Ed!* He doesn't mind. He said, seeing things had got to the state they had, and there being no children and all, he supposed it might as well be. Just as if *I* got things to such a state! Why, night after night, I've asked him to take me places, and he wouldn't! And as to children, he didn't seem to want any, not from the very beginning." Jen tried to steady herself.

"I always thought Ed was awfully kind!" she said.

"Kind—*kind?* Did I say he was cruel? But I don't see that it's kind to want to deprive your wife of every legitimate pleasure, to cut down on her spending when he can really afford to be generous, always nagging at her to spend evenings reading with him, when he knows it bores her to madness! If he'd read stories! But it's articles, dry-as-dust old articles, or else Dickens or books on fishing!"

There was nothing real there, either, except that wistfulness which she tried to keep back. She was like a child in a fit of temper, scared and lonesome under her rage. Jen had never so much wanted to help her, so little known what to do.

She got up from the table, and went out to the barn. Zeb was there, puttering about.

"That roan horse is lame again, Mis' Culliton!" he said.

"Well, you better go call Doc Ostrander if that liniment won't help!" she said mechanically. He went toward the house and she did not notice his going.

She went in and sat down on a crate. A pigeon strutted across the barn floor, came close to her, but she had neither grain nor word for it. Margaret, her girl Margaret, and Ed—going to get a divorce! Jen looked down at her own wedding ring, tight on the big finger. It was broad and ugly beside Margaret's graceful, narrow band, but it was a *wedding ring*. Sweet as arbutus, strong as Gibraltar, endless as eternity, no whit changed since thirty-four years ago. Jen still was Steve's. She had read somewhere that one out of every twelve marriages nowadays ended in divorce, and had looked on the statement as bosh. And now here was Margaret—her girl, Margaret, and Ed!

What was it Margaret wanted? She had so much and yet she wanted more. Perhaps she'd been starved when she was little, was making up

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for it now. And yet she had seemed a happy child—she *was* a happy child. Only, pleasures meant more then. A party or a Saturday's coasting or a husking was something to be lived beforehand for a week or more. Now Margaret played bridge every day—*every day!* She had had it too easy, nothing to fight for, nothing to work for, no great troubles, no great joys. She would have to be waked up.

"Mebbe," Jen said slowly, searching for the answer, "mebbe this will wake her up! Mebbe—being away—she'll find out! Time fixes up lots of troubles." She got heavily to her feet and went to the house. She felt old.

Time appeared to have nothing to do with the matter. Margaret did not refer to Ed again. There seemed no sign that a divorce was any more to her than a squabble over a hand of bridge. And yet Jen knew that her very lightness betrayed her. She couldn't talk of Ed, after that first small outburst; if she hadn't cared, she could have.

Margaret went to the city and brought back her little blue car. She tore over the country roads like mad, seemingly without a care in the world. But one day a friend came for over Sun-

day and they went to the little Corners church. The friend laughed at the minister and the farmers collected there for worship; she laughed at the buggies hitched in the old shed, at the old-fashioned corn-popper collection boxes, and she laughed at her, Jen. But Margaret had not laughed. And after dinner—Jen had taken pains with the dinner and had used the best dishes and linen—the friend wanted to go off somewhere in the blue car. Jen didn't mind being left alone with the dishes, but the thoughtlessness did hurt her a good deal.

"Wait till the dishes are done. We'll all go," Margaret had said.

Yes, Margaret was different. She cared, and it was doing something to her. Maybe she and Ed had just blundered into this as one might blunder against a stone wall in the dark. Misunderstandings do come that way. Jen wondered if she ought to see Ed, and yet, if Ed made no sign, it really wasn't her place to do it.

But Indian Summer vanished and days of crisp cold came. The nuts from the hill pasture chestnut trees rolled from opened brown burs. The trees were nearly bare and the grass brown. The world took on preparation for winter and still

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Margaret stayed, and Jen knew that plans for the divorce went on.

Jen felt confused sometimes, her values being undermined. Maybe it was right that they should no longer live together, if they no longer loved each other.

Then, it was the second Sunday in November, something happened which frightened Jen. She was putting on her silk dress for church when she heard a honking in front of the house. She looked out of the window and saw a man climb out of a car and come up the walk. He was young, very jaunty and self-possessed, and Jen disliked him even before she got downstairs and to the door. Before she could speak to him, Margaret hurried past her, both hands outstretched.

"Why, Carter!" she said in a small, breathless voice. "Why, Carter, why did you come?"

She had intended to go to church with Jen, but she went, instead, with Carter Parkhurst in his car. Jen said nothing. She felt shaken with anger and a queer fright. At the front step she saw Margaret hesitate, take on again that look of sober wistfulness. Jen held her breath, then saw Margaret's lips go stubbornly straight, saw her

turn and go slowly up the walk beside the man.

Jen hitched up old Peter and went to church alone, but she did not hear much of the sermon. Margaret, going off for a whole day with a man who was not her husband! Jen had a queer sense of vicarious guilt. It seemed all the congregation watched her, saw her shame. When she reached home, Zeb added to the feeling. His red face was like fire, but he said his say, as he was wont to do.

"The neighbors is talkin', Mis' Culliton," he said. "Seemed like you'd ought to know!"

"Yes, Zeb," Jen's voice was a little helpless. "Yes, I know!" she said.

When night came, she went early to her room, her lips tight and stern, and watched for Margaret. She would have it out with Margaret once and for all. Then, as the cold wind swept round the house and the house itself became very still, Jen's anger dwindled away. She felt suddenly to blame! If she had built right in the beginning, this wouldn't have happened! It should have been bred in Margaret to stick to bargains, to think of others, to want motherhood, to know marriage was a sacred gift! Times changed, of course; but some things outlasted time itself.

She got up early the next morning. There had been long, wakeful hours during the night so that she did not feel rested. She could hear Zeb whistle as he came 'cross lots. She resented even his nearness when her mind was so confused. The thought kept persisting that maybe Ed was right—that maybe Margaret wasn't worth keeping. She tried to evade the thought, but the memory of Ed's kind eyes denied the evasion. She groped for some way out, could find none. If only she could know Margaret's heart! Suddenly the numb helplessness passed, and her gray eyes became calmer. She went to the telephone.

"Hello, Callie!" Callie was one of Jen's married sisters. "Say, Callie, when you drive in with the milk, want to bring Judy over for the day? Marg'ret's home—like to have her see the little tyke! Going to make molasses cookies to-day, tell Judy. She always likes Aunt Jen's cookies!"

When Margaret came down, sober-eyed and unusually quiet, Judy was there, perched on a high stool, nibbling ecstatically all around the edge of a sugar-sprinkled molasses cookie.

"This is Judy, Callie's littlest one," Jen explained. "Guess you ain't seen her since she was

a baby. Favors her ma, don't she?" Callie had been the prettiest, and the laziest, of them all. Margaret looked quickly at Judy. Great gray eyes under sunny curls looked questioningly and gravely back at Margaret.

"Why, she looks like you, Mother!" Margaret exclaimed. Jen threw back her head and laughed heartily.

"Yes, I was always such a cute little fairy-like thing!" she mocked at her own ungainliness.

It was afternoon before the child made friends with Margaret. Jen saw them, during that little warm hour in the November mid-afternoon, sitting out under the maple tree, some few last bright leaves being made into a crown for the sunny curls. Something in Margaret's eyes as her fingers rested on the small head broke that hard lump in Jen's heart. Comforting tears rushed blindingly for a moment.

There was no fear in her heart when she called Ed in the city. His voice over the wire came, sharp and unnatural in its brusqueness.

"Hello, Ed; this is Mother Culliton. Ed, I want to talk to you a little! Wondered if you couldn't come down Thanksgiving Day? . . . No, she ain't here. . . Yes, I've seen her. Sorry

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things are in such a mess, Ed. . . . You'd rather not come? Wish you could see your way clear to, Ed. Phil gone, and Margaret, be kind of a lonesome day! Like to do a little baking for somebody. . . . All right, Ed. I know I'm kind of a crusty old woman to spend a holiday with, but I'll fix you up a good dinner, anyhow! I'll meet the morning train. . . . All right. 'By, Ed!"

She chuckled a little shamefacedly, as she turned away.

"Kind of a lie about Marg'ret; but she ain't here this minute! Sort of mean to play on his goodness, too. Had to get him somehow, though—both of 'em too stubborn to take the first step of their own accord!"

Carter Parkhurst came twice that week. But Margaret and he stayed in beside the old-fashioned table with its oil lamp and old books. Margaret went about with a queer, lost look in her eyes, as if she'd suddenly found herself in the midst of a marsh where there was no turning back, no going ahead. Jen ached at the despair in them, but she said nothing. She had had her answer and she was going ahead with her meddling. If it didn't turn out right—well, it couldn't be worse than now!

The night before Thanksgiving, Carter Parkhurst called up. Margaret's voice was very unsteady as she talked to him and there was panic in her eyes.

"To-morrow morning? Why, why, it's Thanksgiving! . . . Yes, yes, I suppose it would be a good day. . . . Why, Carter, I—I—"

Jen came to her rescue, feeling as if she were flinging a rope to some one falling over a precipice.

"Marg'ret, don't go making any dates for to-morrow morning! I've got to go to town for a while, and I want you to stay here to watch the baking!" Her voice was sharply authoritative, and ordinarily would have been resented. But there was vast relief in Margaret's voice as she promised to call Carter later in the day.

Thanksgiving morning it was cold enough for snow, but it was raining instead, a cold, steady, driving rain that turned dry leaves into sodden heaps and kept the windows streaming and the eaves running. It was so dark that Jen lighted a lamp to put on the breakfast table. Some of the chill and grayness of the day entered her heart as she set about preparing the turkey and pies for dinner. Her plans now seemed childish and im-

possible. Margaret kept urging her not to go to town, said she'd call up Zeb and have him go; but Jen said it was something she had to attend to herself, and kept her lips grimly closed as to the reason for the necessity. She saw Margaret was curious and wondered if she suspected.

Jen left the pies in the oven—to make good her yesterday's statement—and went to town, bundled up securely against the storm. She felt ashamed to take the horse out on such a day, but she patted him in friendly fashion, gave him an apple, telling him brusquely that they were doing it for Margaret and would have to put up with the rain.

All the way to the station, her doubts persisted. She wondered if her interference would only make a bad matter worse. At times she accused herself of being a meddling old busybody, and then she justified herself by the thought that, after all, Margaret was her little girl.

Ed didn't talk much on the way out to the farm, and Jen, ignoring the question in his eyes, kept to commonplaces. She was glad that the continuing rain made conversation difficult.

When they came in by way of the kitchen, Margaret was at the oven door, basting the turkey. The cover went down on the roaster with

a startled clatter. Ed stood quite still beside the door, the water dripping from his overcoat to Jen's clean floor as he stared at Margaret. Margaret, her face red from the heat of the stove, her eyes blazing, her chin very high, stared back at him. Jen smiled, a little grimly; but, inside, she did not smile at all.

"Shut the oven door, Marg'ret! Did the cranberries jell all right? Ed, hang your things behind the door there!"

Still no word of any sort between those two. Ed hung his coat and hat in the accustomed corner. Margaret shut the oven door, her cheeks crimson. Jen went into the sitting room, leaving them alone for a moment. When she came back with a thick black book under one arm, they still stood there, Margaret by the stove, Ed by the door, looking away from each other, tense and angry. Jen forced a stiff smile.

"Thinking I played kind of a sneaking trick, aren't you? Did, too. But I ain't so ashamed of it as I'd ought to be, mebbe. Ed, quit looking as if you wanted to bite a tenpenny nail in two. Marg'ret, you look like you had a stiffer backbone 'n I thought when your eyes snap that way! Set down, the two of you. Got some things I want

to say. . . . No, set there by the stove—won't nothing explode if you are so close together!"

Folks minded Jen. Ed and Margaret did now, sitting stiffly by the stove, confused and hot with resentment. Jen dropped her air of command, put on, instead, a wistfulness they seldom saw.

"Ed," she said, "when Margaret came home and said you two were parting, it broke me all up. I couldn't believe it. I was brought up old-fashioned, I guess, and look at those things different; but the way I see it, there ain't no divorce or separation papers can make a marriage as if it never was. First off, I was of a notion to spank Marg'ret and ship her back to you, but I soon saw I couldn't do that. Whether it's so serious as Marg'ret makes out, I don't know. But folks these days think their troubles into bigness—nothing else to do. Thinking don't hurt any one, I suppose; but thinking over no-account things is sure to. Looks to me as if that's at the root of it. No, Ed, you don't need to talk—I'm going to have my say now. You and Marg'ret's had yours, and it got you to this state.

"Marg'ret says she's bored. Well, who wouldn't be with no more before 'em than years and years of bridge and dancing and being waited

on? I ain't saying Marg'ret ain't to blame. Does seem as if she might have found something else to take up her time. But Marg'ret's always been a butterfly sort of a girl. If I remember right it was that you used to like about her, that she was so gay and full of life. Folks' natures ain't apt to change without some special happenings to make 'em grow or shrink. Margaret's never had any troubles—nor any babies! So she's sick of things—and I ain't much surprised!"

"But she's had everything," Ed's voice, a little sullen, a great deal hurt, cut in. "She didn't want any children!"

"She's had too much. If she'd had to worry about money, or how to get a dress out of a short length of gingham, or what to do for the croup before the doctor got there, it would have been good for her. She's had nothing to fight for—nothing at all—and folks have to have, or they get soft and useless!"

"Mother!" there was anger and appeal in Margaret's voice.

"Keep still, Marg'ret; I ain't had my say out! You know well enough I'm telling the truth. Now, I've got something to show you—and after you've looked at it a while you can make up your

minds whether you want to eat Thanksgiving dinner together or not."

She took the thick black book from beneath her arm and brought it over to them.

"You'll have to shove over a little bit, Ed. Marg'ret won't bite you if you hold on to one edge of this. Remember this book? See. Remember that day? You and Ed had gone after mountain pinks, Marg'ret, and Ed took your picture up on the side hill. Remember how he laughed about it, saying he thought there was something sweeter 'n pinks in the picture? There you are, like a little girl in your middy blouse! You and Ed took your lunch up to the pine woods that day. Remember it? I guess Ed proposed that day, mebbe, you were so shining-eyed when you got home, and so quiet for days after!"

Jen, standing at the back of their chairs between them, saw Ed turn his head suddenly away and Margaret's hands grip the edge of the book tight.

"Here's the day you climbed up on the haystack, and Ed said he'd kiss you when you came down. Here's you, Ed, the day you got the big raise—weren't you proud and happy! You came up special to tell Margaret, and we had chicken

and biscuits for supper—remember? . . . I don't know where that was taken—oh, yes, up to Loon Lake! You went up there for a week once, Marg'ret, had a cottage with the crowd from Claremont. Ed came up for Sunday.

"Here you are on Bush Hill—remember how you got out the bobs and went coasting that Christmas vacation? You don't look old enough to have been thinking about getting married, do you?

"That one was taken the day before you were married—when Ed came up with the pearls he'd bought for you."

Jen paused. Her throat felt dry. Her big hands fumbled over the pages in the old snapshot book. But she went on.

"Don't seem, does it, that that boy and girl could ever get afraid of each other? Don't seem they could forget all them happy times, does it? Don't seem, when that boy loved that girl so, she could throw off that love like an old shoe, does it?

"Well, here's two more pictures, and then I've got to see about dinner. Here's one of you, Ed, long time ago it was taken—you and the Holcomb baby. I want you should look at it careful,

Marg'ret. Does that look as if Ed didn't want children? Look how he holds that baby—as if 'twas his! Now see here, Ed! Here's one I snapped just a few days back. That's Callie's little girl; now, if Marg'ret can get a look in her eyes like that over a youngster that ain't nothing at all to her—well, look at them two a minute—I got to go out after some wood!"

Jen, shivering by the woodpile, with her hands wrapped in her apron, could hear their voices confusedly, but not the words, even though she strained her ears. Then a chair rasped harshly over the kitchen floor and a door slammed. The voices stopped—suddenly.

Jen thought, with an affrighted clutch at her heart, "He's gone!"

Through the dull splash of the rain and the wet gusts against the house, she heard the unmistakable sound of a car coming out of the driveway. She almost ran to the door, and Jen's big body was not meant for running.

In the kitchen, Ed sat by the table, his shoulders hunched forward. To Jen he suddenly looked old and pitiful. She put one rough, kindly hand on his head.

"There, there, Ed!" she said, while she kept

thinking of Margaret, racing off through the rain and the mud. "Don't mind so, Ed! I was trying to help out—made a mess of things, didn't I!"

Ed didn't answer, just sat there, his head down on his arms.

"Ed, I don't know what Marg'ret said. She can cut pretty deep, I know—but, Ed, I'm afraid—I'm afraid she's gone to Carter Parkhurst! I know he's begged her to. Ed, go after her! I can't bear she should spoil her life this way!"

Ed looked up then.

"I couldn't, after what she said," he answered dully. "It's *her* life."

"She was hurt; she was frightened, Ed!" Jen rarely pleaded, but, suddenly, in a panic, she begged of him: "Ed, she didn't mean it—you *must* go! Why, Ed, she's just a little girl yet, with a little girl's temper! Don't let her go like that! Ed, she loves you, she wants the same things you do, but she can't get near enough to tell you so! Ed, *please* go!"

Ed sat there dully, unseeing. Jen strode to the corner, took down an old mackinaw and a felt hat.

"Where are you going?"

"After my girl!" she said shortly.

He got up then quickly.

"No, I'm going!" He said it almost harshly. "That's *my* business! Could I get Alf Brainard's car, do you think?"

That was all he said. But Jen's relief was so great that she sat down quickly in a great trembling of body and spirit.

"Carter's staying down next the Methodist church!" she called out to him as he went out into the storm. She looked out the door once and saw his tall figure, running across the field toward Brainard's, the rain beating down upon him, but not for a moment stopping him.

The hours after that were pitiaibly long to Jen, sitting by the rain-washed window, straining her eyes to see some sign of their return, straining her ears for the throb of the engine coming up the hill. The turkey was done and she set it on the back of the stove to keep warm. She set the table for three, put on the cranberries and the celery and the baked sweet apples. She filled the teakettle and it steamed and bumped away on the stove till she had to fill it again. But they did not come. Only mothers will know Jen's heart during that time.

She couldn't (and 'twas a pity), see Ed, jerking

Brainard's little car with reckless violence out into the muddy main road, sliding, skidding, with streaming windshields, over the muddy hills toward town. It was a pity she could not see him at the station, where he found the little blue car under the dripping eaves, see the queer, triumphant light in his eyes when he flung the door open and saw Margaret sitting there alone in the deserted waiting room, her hair bright with the gleams from the old coal heater, her shoulders shaking forlornly with sobs, like a little girl.

For it was a sweet thing to see Ed, striding across the uneven floor, pulling her up into his arms, forgetting the things he had wanted to say because of the throbbing of his heart when her wet cheek touched his.

They didn't talk much on the way back. But Margaret sat close to Ed and her shoulder touched his contentedly. It was when they were near the house that Margaret spoke, her voice still catching childishly with its tears, even while it held a new, mature and sober quality.

"Ed," she said, "I don't know what I ran out that way for—I didn't really want to. But—but that's the way with quarrels, I guess. They boss you—make you do things you hate. And Ed—

JEN'S GIRL

Ed—Mother *was* right about a little girl. I *did* want one—only—you'd always said you didn't . . . and, oh, *Ed! How have we ever come so far apart?*"

"Margaret! Margaret, *'honey!'*" was all he could say, but there was a fierceness in his voice that said they would never get so far apart again, never!

Up the last hill through the wind-driven rain, but rain mattered not to them. All around the two was a great warmth and sense of shelter, the feeling of *home*.

Of course Jen never knew all about that. A pity, when she'd brought it about! All she knew was that when they came, very late, for dinner, they were as they had been when they'd stood up before the preacher. And she knew, too, without knowing why she knew, that as they sat down to the warmed-up food, it was such a Thanksgiving dinner as they'd never had before.

CHAPTER IV

"FLINT" MILLER'S BOY COMES HOME

IT was the next summer after Margaret and Ed had come together again, that Jen found her life suddenly tangled up with that of a stranger. She came upon him leaning against her fence, his thin hands about the wire as if it were not only a thin strand, but a real support for his weakness. She had come down from the north field, and had been so intent upon her wheat that she had not seen the boy at first. She had even spoken aloud, her hands on her hips, looking out upon the ripe beauty of the grain:

"Twenty-six acres of sunshine—ready on Friday to cut! If only Steve could have seen it! He just saw it in potatoes—potatoes that had to rot in the ground!"

The boy was watching her, and she would have laughed if she had known he thought her words sounded like poetry. In truth, they really were a saga of the years past, and the satisfaction of victory stirred vaguely in Jen.

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To the boy beside the fence, that evidence of victory was like a great rock to lean upon. He saw the obvious things—that she was big, with a rough, unsmoothed bigness, like that of a lonely oak that has faced the storms of the years in an open field. He saw that she was plain almost to ugliness, weatherbeaten as to skin, square of chin. He saw her as she looked, but the something in him that had brought him here made him feel her as she was.

He was a little dizzy from the terrible heat and the long way; and the wheat seemed to be moving in bright waves.

Then Jen turned and saw him: a boy—tall as a man, but a *boy*—a sick boy, with shabby clothes and great dark eyes filled with a defiance that was out of place when you saw how very ill he was. For just an instant, Jen felt embarrassed to think any one should have heard her talking to herself.

But Jen, so big and brusque, was absurdly tender with small or helpless or hurt things, and she forgot embarrassment in instant compassion for this boy, so patently sick and miserable. She tried swiftly to place him—he wasn't one of the Parson boys, nor one of the huge Laraway men,

nor one of the Jones' big brood. But there was something familiar about him.

"You seen Curt Miller go by?" the boy asked. His voice was defiant, like his eyes. Suddenly Jen knew who he was. She looked at him more sharply.

"Why, yes—hour or so back! He'll likely be along this way soon. You'd better get in out of this sun; it's terrible hot to-day, and you look tuckered out!"

Curt Miller! Yes, it was Curt's boy come home again! The bad egg, who had run away! Jen started along the road as if she expected him to follow her. She would have liked to take his arm, but she felt he might resent it. "Flint" Miller's boy, "Hard-as-Flint" Miller's boy, had come home again! She looked back. He had not moved from where he stood.

"I'll wait here for him," he persisted stubbornly. "I've got to see him. Where'd he go, do you know?"

"Why, he was going up to Frazier's to see about a mortgage," she said. Instantly she could have bitten her tongue off, for the boy began to laugh, and it was laughter not pleasant to hear.

"S'pose I didn't need to ask!" he made mock

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apology. "That's where he was always going—to see about a mortgage!"

Jen saw that he was really ill, that he was not letting go of the wire fence because he could not, without falling. She dared his resentment, went back and took his arm. Curt Miller's boy!—Curt Miller's boy, Chan!

"Come on up under the trees a few minutes," she said. "You walked up from Claremont in this sun?"

He laughed again and walked along beside her, but he kept looking up the road.

"From Claremont? No. From Muncie, Indiana!"

Jen looked at him, alarmed. She guided him up to the hammock under the big maples.

"Lie down!" she commanded. "This sun has done you right up! I'll get something cool for you to drink!"

"Muncie, Indiana!" she repeated to herself as she squeezed lemons for lemonade. "*Muncie, Indiana!* The boy must be out of his head!"

He took the lemonade gratefully, though Jen saw with a start that his hands were nothing but skin stretched tight over the bones and could hardly hold the glass. Curt Miller's boy!

"Just lie still," Jen said. "When Mr. Miller comes along, I'll let you know!"

He had been about to let his head drop again to the hammock, but now he sat bolt upright.

"I'll get out to the road," he said. "I've come quite a ways and I don't want to miss him!"

"Now, look here!" Jen said. "You ain't fit to walk out to that road, let alone set and watch for anybody on a day like this! I'll let you know and I'll see that he stops all right!"

But really Jen was wondering how she could manage not to let them meet. Curt, with his constant preaching against shiftlessness—he would laugh at this tramp son of his! And Curt, after he had secured a mortgage, always looked like a cat just outside a canary; the boy, bitter already, would be worse if he should see him now.

"It's a long stretch to Indiana!" Jen said.

"Yes; quite a long stretch!" agreed the boy. "But I got a lot of rides."

"Why, he really meant it!" Jen thought. Aloud she said, "You must have wanted to get home bad, Chan!"

He looked at her in sharp surprise. It was a full minute before he answered her.

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"I come home to die," he stated without expression. It was Jen's turn to start. Then the flatness of his voice livened suddenly into a terrible rage that startled Jen.

"Damn him!" he cried. "Turned me into a thief and a liar—put me out of my home—sent me to jail! But he can't turn me out now, not when I'm dying! I'll make him sorry yet!"

"*Dying?* Who said you were dying?" Jen tried to laugh at the idea.

"The prison doctor, but he didn't need to. I knew it! Two years in jail!" He laughed again, such an ugly sound that Jen had an impulse to put her hand over his mouth. "Guess the president of the First National won't hold his head quite so high now—not when folks know his boy was in jail two years!"

Jen shivered a little, there in the heat of the August day. She heard a car coming over Bush Hill and she waited, tense, till she knew it was not Curt.

"What were you in jail for?" she asked mechanically, her mind busy with the problem of how to keep him away from his father.

"Forged a check; same as he said I did here! But he was a liar! I didn't do it—not that time!

But this time I did. And he's to blame! Is he a trustee in the church yet? I hope so; he'll crawl under his pew and hide his face by the time I die!"

Jen saw he was shaking. He was too sick to know what he was saying. She could not let him meet his father this way! Flint Miller—Hard-as-Flint Miller. She got up abruptly and took his arm.

"Get up, Chan," she insisted kindly. "You're sick, and you'll have to go inside where it's cooler! Come on—no, lean on me—you're sick."

He seemed determined to lean on no one; but he must have realized that he could stand it no longer out in the heat, for he went with her and she helped him to the couch in the sitting room. He dropped down, too exhausted to lift one foot up beside the other. But he had to talk. He had come hundreds of miles to get to Curt Miller. He had talked to no one, at least not more than in monosyllables, since he left Muncie; and now, so near, something seemed loosed in him.

"He used to leave money lying around to see if I'd take it!" he went on with bitter, sick monotony. "Scared me into lying and then half killed me for it! I'll make him pay for it—I'll *make him pay for it!* He can't hurt me any more, not

any more! You can't hurt a person that's dying, can you? But I can hurt *him!*"

"There, there, Chan!" she said, as to a little child.

A car came tearing along the road. Chan suddenly pulled at his strength, got to his feet.

"Is that him?" he demanded. Jen looked out the door. Yes, it was Curt's gray car—but she couldn't have it—not here! Why, it would be horrible!

"Chan, lie still!" She pushed him down again. "You're too sick to get up!"

"Too sick—tommyrot! Say, I've been sicker 'n this for a week and kept going. I feel good now! Leggo my arm; I've got to get out and watch!" But, suddenly, even as he proclaimed his strength, he crumpled again up on the couch, began to talk again. This time in scraps, horror scraps that made Jen want to take him in her arms and comfort him.

"Pa," he said, "you don't dast—don't you dast hit me! I didn't do it—I swear—cross my heart I didn't do it! What'd I want of a bag o' chestnuts? Ain't I got a gunnysack most full? Pa—I didn't—hope to die I didn't! *Pa!*"

"Chan—Chan—there, there! It's just Jen

Culliton. I'll take care of you, Chan. It ain't your pa!"

She went for cold water and bathed his hot, dusty face. Then she went to the 'phone and called Bess Beamer from up the Creek.

"Got a patient for you, Bess; come over as soon as you can!" she said. "No, it ain't anv of my folks!"

She wanted to shut her ears to Chan Miller's voice as she waited for Bess. But she couldn't.

"Thought you'd got rid of me, didn't you, Pa? Thought you had, huh? But I got homesick for you in jail, Pa—terrible homesick!" He laughed, a long, weak, ugly roll of laughter that was worse than his voice. "Ain't you glad to see your boy home from jail, Pa? Ain't you glad? Want I should go to prayer meeting with you to-night?"

Jen bathed his forehead again. She wondered if she ought to call a doctor. But the Claremont doctor was so nosey—it would be all over town by night. Bess was better'n any doctor, anyhow.

"Pa! ef you kill that dog o' mine, I'll kill you! He *ain't* stole any of your chickens—he was by my bed all night—he's the best dog in Claremont! Pa—don't you dare kill 'im!"

"Chan," Jen tried to soothe him, "your pa

can't kill your dog. Your pa ain't even here! Nip! Here, Nip!" She went to the door and called her own dog to her. "See, here's your dog!" She lifted his hand to Nip's head and he was instantly quiet. When Nip tried to move away she held him there.

"Look, Tatters! See—a squirrel! But we won't get 'im, Tatters—he's too little and pretty, ain't he? Stay still, boy—let 'im go!"

Jen put her hand on his head, pushed back the rumpled black hair. She felt a great rage against old Flint Miller. Jen was not often moved to wrath, but she almost shook now with its force. She remembered how the old bank president's little sandy beard stuck straight out, as if he were always on the edge of a controversy, how his eyes were always looking this way and that, as if he could see in dark corners all the little hidden-away secrets of your life.

"He's not going to see Chan!" she vowed to herself. "Chan can't hurt him, he's too thick-skinned; but he'll hurt Chan, even if he is dying! —He can't see him!"

Bess came in her little flivver. She was a short woman, round and smiling, as good a nurse as there was in the county; but she liked to farm

better, and stayed at home with her brother most of the time.

"What's the matter, Jen? Thought maybe you'd took sick!"

"H'mph! I ain't got time to be sick! It's Curt Miller's boy, Bess! He's all in—collapsed up by my house. Says he's dying; but I guess it ain't that bad! Bess, it'll break your heart to hear him go on! I'd like to get that Curt Miller by the nape of his stringy old neck and shake him till he squealed!"

Jen felt relieved to have Bess there. She had not been sick herself in years and, except for Steve's last illness, knew little of sickness. But, when Bess shook her head at sight of Chan, Jen felt a queer apprehension.

Jen talked to Bess that night after they had put Chan ("no more heft to him 'n an armful of stove wood!") into the downstairs bedroom and to sleep.

"Do you think I'd ought to get Curt?" she asked Bess. "You know how Curt is—it won't touch him! He'll just see how Chan's come home, looking like a bum, with no money or job, and he'll try some of his self-righteous phrases on him!"

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"No," said Bess slowly. "No, I wouldn't call Curt—not now. It would be just like you say. But the boy's pretty bad, Jen. I guess, in the morning, we'd better call a doctor!"

"Hoped we could get out of that," Jen said. "Doctor Quintzer's such a snoop; he'll go right down to Claremont and tell the whole business to the first one he meets up with!"

"That's so. Well, we'll call Doctor Gray, over to Haverford! Don't know as a doctor can do much, though!"

Jen started. "Is he so bad, Bess?"

"He's an awful sick boy, Jen!"

Bess and Jen were two women who had fought their own battles; hard as nails they were against the ordinary events of life; but, after all, they were two women, and Chan Miller was an ill, heartsick boy with more suffering in his young soul than they could bear to witness. Bess, in the days after that, came more than once to the kitchen and stared out of the window, her handkerchief dabbed with quick impatience at her eyes. Jen lay awake, night after night, piecing together his ugly boyhood's dreams, till she ached with pity from head to toe—pity for Chan, but hatred for "Hard-as-Flint" Miller.

She tried to soothe Chan by talking to him of pleasant things that didn't matter: about the crops, about the men turning in to paint the Corners church, about the hen that had, at this late day, just hatched out fourteen baby chicks. She saw it *did* soothe him, and she got into the habit of coming into the room a dozen times a day with some trivial bit of news: the poplar out by the road was shedding its yellow leaves; Nip had killed a woodchuck; the snow apples were getting ripe.

It was when she spoke about the poplar tree that Chan said:

"There was an oriole's nest . . . once . . . in the elm tree by our house."

Chan never tried, these days, to get up. Sometimes he would rage defiantly against his father. But mostly he was quiet, just too weak to care. And when he spoke about the oriole's nest, Jen's heart leaped. It had all been hatred before; but— "There was an oriole's nest . . . once . . . in the elm tree by our house!" Just a little boy's wistful memory!

Jen took a trip to town that afternoon.

"It's really getting fall!" she said as she drove along. The poplars were all yellow now, and

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here and there a leaf or a single branch of maple flamed scarlet and orange. Jen felt terribly depressed. She drove down King Street to where old Miller's place lorded it over its neighbors. It was a big house, pretentiously big, but it was not beautiful. There was a dark hedge and dark spruce trees, and there were no flowers. Jen saw the big elm tree at once, close to the house at the back. And, yes, there was the long, swaying home of the orioles! Jen looked all about the house, noting the new garage, where there used to be a big barn. There was little else that seemed to matter. Curt Miller was not one for innovations. Jen went, then, to see Sadie Overhiser a few minutes. Sadie was a gossip, and would tell her more in half an hour than most folks could in a week.

After Sadie's, she went home. She sat down beside Chan's bed and began to talk to him. She told him, quite casually, as if oriole's nests came regularly into her daily conversations, that the nest was still there. She told him about the new garage. She told him that Mary Hollister had married Bud Frazier; that Professor Winters had left because they wouldn't raise his pay and that a young man, just out of State College, was

in his place. She told him the new preacher let them play games in the church basement. She told him Betty Lake had run away to California, thinking to get into the movies, and that Johnny Shea had gone after her. She told him they had planted new trees all along in front of the school-house, and about the post office being robbed last spring, and how little Mr. Poggom, who had always been such a coward, had caught the robbers.

As she talked, she saw Chan's eyes, wistfully grateful, intent upon her. Why, she thought, this had been what he'd *wanted* all the time, and she had only been trying to get his mind away from his father!

"Mary Hollister's sister, Rae—where's she? Is she married?" he asked, then turned his head away so Jen could not see his face.

"Rae? Rae Hollister? Oh, no, she's not married! She's in the library; takes care of the children's books. Did you know we had a library now, Chan?"

Jen stored that up in her mind. She must find out more about Rae. She remembered her vaguely, a shy little girl, not especially pretty.

Jen neglected her work after that, gave Zeb a

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free hand, telephoning her friends often, driving to town on the slightest pretext, hoarding up news insatiably. She went into the library and talked to Rae Hollister. A prettier girl than she'd thought! The second time there, she even dared to tell her about Chan.

"I'm wanting these books for a boy that's sick up to my place!" she said. "Mebbe you remember him—Chan Miller?" She gave Rae a sharp look, and saw the crimson creep up to the girl's brown hair.

"I thought I saw him—a month ago—but—but then I thought I must have been mistaken!"

"He's an awfully sick boy," Jen said gently. "I've thought it best that his pa didn't know he was at my house!"

Rae hesitated a little. She didn't know Jen well, and she was shy anyway. But she spoke, quickly, as Jen turned to go.

"Tell Chan I hope he'll soon be better," she said. Stiff, formal words, but under them all the wistfulness of youth. Jen felt curiously warm toward the girl.

Jen took all these bits home to Chan, who now lay quite still all day, not sitting up at all. She brought Claremont to him as clearly as if he were

there himself. Then, one day, as she stood in the doorway, he made a motion for her to come to him.

"I was lying, Mis' Culliton!" he said to her weakly. "I—I didn't come because—because I wanted to hurt *him*! I—I was homesick. I wanted to—to see the—old blue dishes—and the chair with the red cushion, out by the kitchen stove, where Ma used to set and patch; and Grandma Miller's sampler over the bureau in my room. 'God is Love,' it said—there was birds all around it and a rose at the top. And the creek where we went swimming—down where the willows hang over it. And—and I wanted to see the hills with the colors on 'em! Seemed like I *had* to climb Bush Hill after nuts! And Rae—she had a thin blue dress with little pink lines on it like satin—" His voice trailed off to a faint whisper.

Jen went out of the room to the dining room, sat down by the table, and put her head down on her arms. Bess came and found her there, put a kind hand on her shoulder.

Jen looked up, ashamed of the way her lips would not stay firm, and of the tears that ran down her brown cheeks unchecked.

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"I just can't stand it, Bess; he breaks me all up!"

"It won't be much longer," said Bess. "He's getting so weak; I had to feed him this morning!"

Jen put her head down again and cried, this time unashamed.

In the morning she helped Bess move the bed over by the window.

"The hills is right pretty now," she said to Chan. "Mebbe they'd be more to look at 'n this dark old room!"

Chan Miller smiled at her, like a tired but happy small boy, and his eyes never left the window the rest of the morning. That hurt, too, just to see him watching, watching Bush Hill, as if he could never see it enough—as if its reds and yellows and green were food to his weary soul.

Jen called Bess to her in the afternoon. She was troubled.

"Bess, I wonder if I'm doing right—not to tell Curt. It's been pulling at me now for three or four days, as if I'd ought to!"

"Don't seem right to trouble the boy now," Bess said. "But I don't know, Jen—I don't rightly know!"

"It's hard to tell," Jen said worriedly. "I feel like I did at the start; but, of course, he *is* his pa—mebbe I'm wrong!"

At supper time Chan said to Jen, or, rather, to no one except himself, and apropos of nothing: "Once he let me take Tatters and go fishing—all one Saturday!"

That settled it for Jen. She went out and hitched up the horse. Bess hated to have her go.

"Somehow I feel worried, Jen. He's terrible weak to-night. I don't like to be alone."

"I've got to go," was all Jen could say to her. "I've done wrong, Bess—I've got to go!"

She drove out into the chill dusk, hurrying the horse along the road to town, going more swiftly yet in her mind. The horse's hoofs on the smooth macadam kept saying: "Jen—you've done wrong! Jen—you've done wrong!" That was all that was in her head till she reached Claremont.

She went first to Hollister's, called Rae out and told her, gently. There was an instant when the girl's white face glowed with a queer, mature fright through the October shadows, then she went for her hat and coat. They drove down Main Street and up King to the big Miller place. There was no light there and no one came. Jen

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felt a little fear. What if she couldn't find him! She'd done wrong—she'd come between a boy and his father—*she'd done wrong!* Back down Main to the bank. There was a light, and Jen left Rae in the buggy and went in. They were having a directors' meeting, and Curt Miller was just calling them to order when Jen opened the door. She had not even waited to knock.

The men about the table all blinked at her surprisedly. She was a grotesque enough figure, but she had a kind of grandeur of dignity as she stood there in the doorway. She scarcely saw the other men at first—she saw only Curt Miller's small, acquisitive eyes and jutting, sandy beard. It seemed queerly impossible to her, after the weeks she had just endured, that his eyes should still be as hard as that.

"Mr. Miller, I want to see you a minute!" she said.

"Come in, Mrs. Culliton, come right in! It's just the directors, and if it's business it's all right for them to know."

"It's not business," Jan said, with stern evenness. "It's not business—and I've got to see you alone!"

The faces all stared at her from about the

table, curious, distorted queerly by the shadows. She saw suddenly that Curt was determined not to come, that he thought this meeting was of more importance than anything she could possibly have to say to him! "*Hard-as-Flint*" Miller! But the rest! For a second she had an impulse to say it in front of them all—they were all her friends—Butler of the drug store, Pritchard of the hardware, Mr. Toliver and Jim Hohn. But she didn't. She turned to them.

"Will you men get out a little while?" she asked. It was almost a command. "I want to talk to Mr. Miller, alone."

They glanced uneasily at Curt, and Jen's mouth twitched to sudden scorn. All under his thumb, were they? But they got up and filed out. She could hear them laughing and talking out in front of the bank.

"Well, what is it, Mrs. Culliton?"

"It's not a mortgage," Jen said grimly. She put her big, rough hands on the back of a chair, and gripped it, hard. "It's your boy, Curt Miller—he's up to my house, and he's sick!"

It seemed to Jen that for the most fleeting of seconds she saw something replace the hardness of Curt's eyes, but almost instantly it was gone.

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"H'mph! Hard up and come home to sponge!" he said.

"You don't need to worry, Mr. Miller," Jen suddenly wanted to be cruel, to hurt him so terribly that he'd scream. "He's hard up all right, he's been in jail for two years! But you don't need to worry, he'll never sponge on you again—he's dying!"

Curt Miller started, almost in fear. But, even then, he only said, "H'mph! He was tough as hickory! That kind can get awful sick and pull through!"

Jen shook her head. She searched for more hurting words, anything to pierce that crusty shield of self-righteousness.

"He ain't going to pull through," she said. "Bess Beamer's been there five weeks—it's only hours now!"

"Only hours? Why didn't you tell me? *Only hours?*" The fear was suddenly quite clear. He was beginning to feel it, thought Jen, and she thought it with exultance.

"There's good reason why I didn't tell you," she said. "But you're going up there, Curt Miller, if you do it at the end of a pistol—and you're going to make his going easy! Listen—I

don't suppose it'll touch you—you're too hard—but listen!"

She told him, while he stood there, suddenly queerly shrunken and old, of the day Chan had come to her, of how she had not dared to let them meet, of the pitiful fear and hatred and defiance that had streamed through Chan's delirium. And then of yesterday, when Chan had said he had lied.

"And now," Jen had to bite her lips to keep on speaking, "and now he's just watching Bush Hill, that he'll never get to climb, and hanging onto the thought that once you let him take his dog and go off for a day's fishing. It's the only kindness he can seem to conjure up! You're a hard man, Curt Miller, every one knows you're hard; but if you let that boy go without telling him you love him, you'll be harder 'n God ought to let live!"

To her sudden amazement, she saw that Curt was crying—awful, silent tears that seemed to burn down his hard old face. He did not answer her, but he picked up his hat and followed her out of the room. The men saw them come out, old Curt Miller crying, Jen, grim and silent, beside him. Curt went past them without a word.

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"I didn't mean to be so hard—I didn't mean it!" he kept saying to Jen, as if begging for comfort. Jen would not give it to him. She turned to the buggy, but he said in a stiff, old voice, "My car'll be quicker!" So they all got in and went roaring up over the hills, through the autumn night, to the Culliton place. Jen kept Rae's cold hand in hers all the way.

She didn't know just why she'd brought Rae. But she kept thinking about a schoolgirl in a thin blue dress with pink lines like satin. And Rae was young—it wouldn't hurt her. It would even be a good and beautiful thing to remember. She hadn't known why she'd gone after Curt, either, only that she'd had to. He didn't say anything now. Jen felt hateful and stony toward him till they stood outside the door. Then the old man spoke and Jen was suddenly forgivingly sorry for him. She *had* been wrong! For she saw he had been hurt, cruelly hurt, these last years, that he was Chan's *father*, and that he cared! He had cared all the time, maybe, only he had been a stern, close, stony man, unable to say so!

"I'm not fit!" he said, on the threshold.

Chan lay quite still. He did not even notice them at first, not till they were close beside his

bed. Then his young eyes, tired-of-life boy's eyes, brightened to a sudden and overwhelming joy.

"Pa! . . . Rae!"

Curt Miller went down on his knees by the bed, his long-tailed coat, which he always wore at directors' meetings, flopping like drooped, rusty-black wings on either side of him.

"Chan—Chan—*my boy, Chan!*" he said over and over. "*Chan—I'm sorry!*" He didn't say for what, but it seemed to include everything, so great was its remorse. "Chan—I've got Tatters yet—I'll bring him up to-morrow! Chan! *I don't care what you done, Chan—I don't care a mite!*"

Difficult words, verily pulled out of his hardness.

Chan did not answer him. He was not going to answer any one any more. But in his eyes was a sudden, complete contentment. Rae's hand was in his, and she was saying things, little foolish things, that had been waiting in her girl's heart through the years. She said them right into Curt Miller's talking. They strangely blended—became beautiful and satisfying together.

Jen and Bess crept out and left the three of them together.

"FLINT" MILLER'S BOY COMES HOME

"It's right he should just have his own!" was what Jen said, as she lifted a sleeve across her eyes. But, though the tears came, she felt queerly glad, not like crying at all. Chan, the boy home from prison, was climbing Bush Hill of his home town at last, and Curt Miller, "Hard-as-Flint" Miller, was helping him over!

CHAPTER V

THE MINISTER WHO THOUGHT HE WAS A FAILURE

THE weeks with "Flint" Miller's boy did something to Jen. She'd always been an understanding woman, but this deepened her understanding, somehow, gave her a new power of penetration. It softened her brusqueness a little, and made her look here and there for places to use her tenderness and strength. She found one place soon enough. She found it in John Marrow.

There are two sides to every situation. There were two to the matter of Rev. John Marrow. One, though we'll come to that later, belonged to John Marrow himself. The other belonged to the folks who came each Sunday to the little weatherbeaten church at the Corners to hear him preach.

They were fewer than in years past. Once the sheds in back were filled each Sunday: the Mayne's surrey with its fringe around the top, the

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old but well-washed buckboard of the Laraways, the rubber-tired turnout of Johnny Frazier, Walter Jones's yellow-wheeled carry-all—they were in the same place every Sunday morning at half-past ten, rain or snow or shine.

The sheds had not been full now, though, for several years. The Maynes had gone West. The Laraway girls had gone to college, and drove, now, a small scarlet car like a young wheeled demon over the hills, never dreaming of stopping at the Corners church. Johnny Frazier had opened a gasolene station at his place, and his folks had a little roadside booth for selling ice cream and ginger ale. Their best trade was on Sunday. Walter Jones still came, and sat in the same pew, but his wife was dead and the children never came with him.

It is small wonder, perhaps, that folks didn't come. John Marrow was getting old; he talked slowly—of faith and justification and atonement, terms that were old-fashioned and meaningless to the new generation. He looked over the tops of his glasses before each of his many summaries. He urged, even after twenty-seven years, that the young folks come to prayer meeting. There were, perhaps, half a dozen of the "old guard" left;

and a few of their children came, but their grandchildren not at all.

Jen was one who still came. She never thought much about the matter; she just went. It was part of Sunday and had been, ever since she was a girl. She had been the eldest of eleven and, oh, the scrubbings, the hair-smoothings, the buttonings, the admonitions, it had meant to get ten, besides herself, ready for church and Sunday School! You might have thought she'd have hated it, but she never did. There was something very soul-satisfying in that long line of starched white dresses and blouses and shining faces. It happened once a week, and only once, that they were all clean and good together.

After she was married, she had kept on going as a matter of course. She worked terribly hard six days out of every week, and the seventh she rested. Sometimes, in the first years after her husband had died, she was hard put to it to have a whole white dress for Margaret or a respectable blouse for Phil, but she had managed somehow.

John Marrow had been preaching at the Corners when she was first married. He'd not been so old then nor so set in his ways. He'd not had,

then, that discouraged droop to his shoulders, nor that quaver in his voice. He was old now, there was no doubt of it, and yet he was as much a part of Sunday to Jen as the day part of the week. It was not, perhaps, the things he said that inspired her. Sometimes, it must be confessed, she did not even listen. But she gained a peace there, in the big, musty room, that lasted her throughout the week.

And now they were talking of putting him out and having the new minister from Claremont come on Sunday afternoons. The young folks didn't attend, there wasn't much of a Sunday School—it was time they had some young man. But Jen felt irritated and lost whenever she thought about it. John Marrow was something steady and lasting in her firmament. She knew the things people said were so; but she thought, too, of all the years of service the Rev. Mr. Marrow had given to the little old church, and she felt it would be a sort of betrayal to let him go now. He did his best, and his support was feeble. She got to thinking, one Sunday when there were only a few there, that maybe she hadn't been as faithful as she might have been. She promised herself she'd go to prayer meeting Thursday night.

On Thursday night Jen came in from the barn about half-past six. It was May and the old Culliton place was filled from end to end with the warm, soft fragrance of apple blossoms and lilacs. Jen felt a tired content. It had been a good day; she and Zeb had finished a good day's work. She had a basket of eggs on her arm, and when she reached the back porch she put the basket on the top step and sat beside it.

She sat silent for some minutes, letting the pleasant, warm breeze, the memory-laden smells, and the comfortably drowsy, settling-down noises of the chickens mingle with her thoughts. Suddenly, from down toward the Corners, there came a faint, sweet chiming, the sound of the first bell for Thursday night prayer meeting.

Jen gave a little start—she had forgotten it was Thursday. She got to her feet, her big frame a little cumbersome from years and the day's accumulated weariness. She pulled her ragged straw hat from her head, pushed the sandy hair yet more ruthlessly backward.

She went into the house, washed at the kitchen sink and went to her room, where she changed the khaki clothes for a clean gingham, and tidied her hair. Because she was tired was no excuse

to her for not keeping her promise, even though the promise was only to herself.

"I clean forgot it was prayer-meeting night!" she apologized once, to herself. "But if I hurry I can get there before it's over!"

She did not get out any of the horses; it was but a little way, and she could walk it almost as quickly as she could hitch up. She thought, and rightly, that it was her coming at all that would count. She swung along the roadside, hurrying a little because she was late. All the way she kept thinking of Mr. Marrow. He lived three miles away on a little patch of stony farmland and, even when the drifts were worst, he was always there to ring the first bell for prayer meeting. He'd not been very well when he first came, and he'd said he would just preach for them to help out for a year or two, till he should get his strength back. They hadn't been able to pay much at the Corners, of course. And here he was yet—half farmer, half preacher—grown old among them! Jen felt a queer tightness at her throat, just thinking of him. She had a curious sense of shame because she had not found time to go to prayer meeting more often.

Jen came near the church. Its worn old bulk

rose, gray and desolate, out of the colorful May twilight. The little yard was neat, because Mr. Marrow kept it so; but the sheds were broken and the paint was peeling off. The apple orchard across the way, Jen thought, would have been a more fit place for prayer.

As she stepped into the vestibule, she heard a voice raised appealingly. It was Mr. Marrow himself and Jen was aware, in a moment, of a strange quality in his voice—not his regular Sunday tones at all.

"You know, Lord," he was saying, "what 'tis to be alone! Why can't I get them to come? I've been failing Thee, Lord! 'Most thirty years and not one in Thy house on Thursday night! I'm not worth even the little they give me—and they're going to turn me out! I've tried, Lord; I've tried with all there is in me, but I can't keep the young ones—they stray away out into the world! They laugh at me and my message! Mary—oh, Lord—*Mary* thinks they're right; *she* thinks I've failed, too! And I have—I'm all alone—oh, Lord, *stay Thou with me!*"

Through the doorway, Jen saw the bowed white head above the old red plush chair by the leader's table. There was no one else in the big,

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bare room. She went out as quietly as she could, and up the road toward home. The great mass of apple blossoms across from the church was a misty gray and sometimes she stumbled, because she could not quite see the path.

She found she couldn't eat much supper. When she was in bed she didn't pretend to sleep. She tried to think the thing out. She felt, though she did not know just why, a curious responsibility in the matter. She shrank, with a reluctance unlike her, from the responsibility. It was a business so filled with emotion and sentiment that she was afraid of it. Jen was as full of sentiment as a milkweed pod is full of seeds, but she fled from expression of it, as if she realized it was hopelessly out of place in her big, awkward, homely self.

But she couldn't put the thought of old Mr. Marrow away from her. Probably, in a few days, they'd ask the other minister to come. Who'd tell Mr. Marrow? Was there really one among them so hard of heart as to be able to do it? They couldn't—an old man like him! Why, he was so feeble he'd only last a little while, anyway. And they begrudged him his peace for that little while! And he'd been so good to them all!

In the morning she called up Allie Parsons.

"Hello, Allie! This is Jen. You folks pretty busy plantin'? . . . Say, Allie, I've got it in my head I want a little party to-night. I just made a couple gallons of ice cream; can't you folks come over and help me eat it? . . . Oh, any time, soon as you get your supper work out of the way! . . . All right, Allie!"

After that, she called up the Fraziers and the Laraways and Bartons and Joneses—all the neighbors on the hills close at hand. She made it a point that the young folks come.

"I've got a birthday coming in a couple days—guess I have a right to a birthday party!" she told herself. She went into the kitchen and broke eggs recklessly for angel food and golden cake and solid chocolate. She ground up meat for sandwiches and made the house bright and dustless. She had a little fright in her heart all day as to what she was going to do, and she grew confused when she tried to find words for her task.

After farm chores were done, the neighbors began to come. A few years back they'd had such gatherings often, and they all seemed glad to resume the habit. Allie and her family were first, and then came the Laraways. Even the two

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Laraway girls had come in the little red car. They brought an armful of bright-colored music, as Jen had asked them to do. It was a jolly crowd, full of reminiscences and friendly gossip. Fat Mrs. Frazier's big laugh set them off into a new gale of merriment every few minutes. Allie asked Jen to get out her old photographs, and even the young folks had a lot of fun over them. Dot Laraway played the old organ, and they sang the jazziest of the jazzy new pieces. They were noisy and happy.

Then they opened the ice cream—yellow with eggs and cream—and the boys put on Jen's big aprons and passed the refreshments around. It was while they were eating that Jen gathered her courage into her hands and stood up.

"Speech, Jen!" some one called out. Every one laughed.

Jen tried to smile, but found it too serious a moment.

"Folks," she said, and the laughter died away suddenly, as all the little sounds of nature die away before the majesty of a storm. "Folks, I suppose you all wondered why I got it into my head to have a party to-night, right in busy season and all. Maybe you thought I had some reason out-

side of just neighborhood fun, though that's reason enough, goodness knows! But this isn't my party. 'Tisn't yours, either. It's Rev. Mr. Marrow's!"

They were all listening. Jen wished they wouldn't listen quite so intently—it was hard to talk with every one's eyes turned her way, and she wasn't so much of a talker at best.

"We've been remembering to-night some of the days when we were younger. But there's some things we seem to have forgotten. Dot Laraway, I wonder if you remember one Christmas when you were four or five, and you came to the Christmas exercises at the church and there wasn't any Santa Claus? You cried and cried; I recall just how you looked, curled up in your father's arms, your face all wet and hot from crying. It was a bitter night and it had snowed so over in the Hollow during the day that the man who had promised to be Santa Claus hadn't come. Mr. Marrow slipped out and got his horse and drove over after that suit. He had to walk part of the way, but he got back in time to be the funniest, jolliest Santa you'd ever seen!

"Johnny Frazier, do you remember the time you fell off the barn and broke some ribs, 'most

killing yourself? I reckon you ain't forgot it! Remember how Mr. Marrow drove over two miles and back every night to help with the chores till you got so's you could be around again?"

She didn't wait for John Frazier to answer, though he half rose as if to speak.

"Bill Jones, maybe you've sort of forgot the time your pa died. You was pretty small. It was pretty hard sledding, I guess, with so many of you young 'uns to feed and dress. I remember seeing Mr. Marrow over plowing your garden—and didn't he pay you boys for helping pick his strawberries, berries he'd always picked himself before?

"Remember when your Molly had diphtheria, Allie? Who was it come every day to see if he could help out?

"Who was it bought Sunday School papers for the children, out of his own pocket, when we thought we couldn't afford 'em any longer? Mary—maybe you won't thank me for calling it to mind—but there was a time when you and Jim was close to parting over some picayune little quarrel, and all us neighbors was taking sides with one or the other of you and egging you on to quarrel all the more. And Mr. Marrow came

over one afternoon when I was there, and he made us all cry before we got through. It was the end of the quarrel!"

Mary Burton's face was crimson, but her eyes were suddenly wet, too.

"And I don't know what I'd have done myself if I couldn't have gone down there to the Corners every Sunday. It's sort of put peace and courage into me; seemed sometimes as if I couldn't bear all the trouble and responsibility that came to me; but I found out how—I found out how! After Steve went, 'twasn't so easy—a good many rough spots come in the years—I don't believe there's anybody here that *hasn't* come to rough spots, when it comes to that; and I guess, if you'll think it over, you'll find out that John Marrow was there most every time to help you over 'em!"

There was a curious unity of shame on all the faces.

"Now, Mr. Marrow's old. He's slow. He's old-fashioned. Sometimes he's tiresome. We're tired of him, maybe. You young people think he's out of date. Mebbe he is. He's great on faith—sort of his hobby. You say folks don't talk about things that way any more. Mebbe not; but when the Dallas boy was arrested for stealing,

I noticed how every last one of you girls and boys who'd played round with him, stuck by him! Times ain't changed so much—only mebbe you practice faith more'n you preach it. And I wonder if you didn't learn your first lessons in faith right down there at the Corners church! Seems to me it's up to us to put our shoulders under the wheel. There's enough young folks up here to make a good live Sunday School, and I don't know why you can't have lots of good, jolly church socials like you used to have. A minister ain't all of a church; it's got to have members.

"Mebbe you don't agree with all of Mr. Marrow's notions; but, I say, when he's done so much for us all, we'd ought to stand by him for the few years he's got left. It would be worse'n shooting an old horse that can't work any more, to let him go. He has a wife that's half invalid. What would he do without the little he gets here? Why not even make it more? Most of us have been let to prosper. I'm willing to put another hundred a year into the salary, and I guess all of us could give some more if we tried. Mebbe I shouldn't tell it, but last Thursday night I made up my mind to go to prayer meeting. I hadn't been in a year."

Jen paused, swallowing hard. Emotion was getting her, against her will! She went on, faltering a little. . . . Old Mr. Marrow, all alone in the old church. Alone—after twenty-seven years of labor for that church! Praying there—*alone!* Knowing he was a failure. They all saw him, as she had. . . .

“But he isn’t; it’s our job now to show him he hasn’t been a failure. To pay him back a little of what we’ve received from him. What if he hadn’t been there all those hard times I’ve spoken about? Folks, let’s all get together again—Sunday morning!”

They were still for a long minute. Then Dot Laraway began to play softly, “How Firm a Foundation,” and they all sang it. Allie stood up then.

“You’re right, Jen. We’ve been awful thoughtless. Why—when I think about that time we ’most lost Molly! I’m willing to put a little more in toward a raise in the salary; let’s see if we can raise it three hundred, anyway—and tell him Sunday!”

They gathered around Jen then, making pledges, drawn closer yet by their new common cause.

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On Sunday morning, Jen was there, as usual, five minutes before the last bell rang. There was old Walter Jones in his pew, Allie and her family in theirs—three or four others. Jen didn't quite know what she'd expected, but as she walked up to her place and sat down, she was conscious of a sharp disappointment. It was all just as usual. Then she saw the two great crocks full of mountain pinks up by the pulpit. She saw, too, the little table down in front, shining and free from dust. The first heaviness of heart turned to lightness. They *had* meant it! Then she heard a car drive in beside the church, and another. There came the Laraways—seven of them! There was Johnny Frazier and Mary and their girl's children with them; Johnny's cousin Lem and his wife; the Payne boys from down in the Hollow; Bill Follansbee, from up past Jen's.

With the flowers and the white dresses of the children and all, it was like an old-time Children's Day, Jen thought. Her heart was very full. Johnny Frazier went up and laid an envelope on the pulpit. There was a queer tension over the room. Folks were all acutely aware of each other, a little ashamed of the emotion they could not hide.

Old Mr. Marrow sat there with the envelope in his hands, staring at the message it contained, even after they were all still, waiting for him to announce the first hymn. Jen noticed how very white his hair was, how stooped his old shoulders, how deep the lines in his face. His hands, holding the envelope, trembled. Jen suddenly couldn't look at him. She looked, instead, at the Plants children in the seat ahead of her. For an instant it seemed to Jen they were her Philip and Margaret come back out of the long ago. She remembered Mr. Marrow's coming to dinner once and bringing a little rabbit for a pet. He had always had a way with children. The stillness in the big room was becoming unbearable. It hurt. A soft breeze, sweeping across the room between open windows, was almost a voice.

Then he stood up, the shabby, old preacher in his worn Prince Albert. He peered over his glasses at them, and the old habit bothered no one, was suddenly only a loved part of him.

"Dearly beloved," he said at last in his quavering voice, then paused and drew out a big white handkerchief and rubbed at his glasses. Jen had a swift memory of "The Good Shepherd" that used to hang in the Sunday School room when she

was a child. He'd been like that to them—and they'd forgotten! For several long seconds he stood there, rubbing away at the silver-rimmed spectacles, not able to go on. The whiteness of his handkerchief made Jen remember some one had said he did the washing since his wife had been so poorly. Mary Plants bent over, pretending to straighten her Tom's tie, and Jen saw her brush her sleeve swiftly across her eyes before she lifted her head.

"Dearly beloved," he began again, swallowed hard and stopped. Jen's lids smarted; she ached to go on for him. He seemed so very old and frail there, back of the great glowing bouquets of mountain pinks. Too frail to carry all that great joy that crowded past his emotion and found place in his kind, faded-blue old eyes. That just giving an old man his rightful dues should bring a look like that! Big Jen Culliton felt very small and humble, had a feeling that every one else in the room felt small and humble, too. Then strength came to the bent shoulders and they straightened, if ever so little. Words came, too, halting but fervent, stammering, but from such depths as, perhaps, only Jen Culliton had known existed.

"The Lord is my Shepherd . . . I shall not want!" he said brokenly. "Friends, I forgot it. I was down in the valley of the shadow—and I was afraid! I prayed for a miracle, not believing it would come! I feel little and ashamed—that you should do this for me. I'm worn out. I can't do service for the Lord like I used to. I was discouraged—please God you will never know how discouraged! It—it was so black—I couldn't see any light, not even a small light. *My faith was so small!* No one came to the Lord's house to the mid-week service. I—rebelled—I thought I was all alone! I—I've had poor luck these last years on my place. Things wouldn't grow for me. My wife had to have a little operation. I heard—I thought you didn't want me any more. It—it seemed like a wall on every side. When—I thought I was going to leave you, after all these years—I—I'm an old man—I can't stand up to disappointments like I used to!" He fingered again the paper, looked down on them all; Jen thought again of "The Good Shepherd." He reached once more for his glasses. "I'll try to work harder this year. It—it's good to be wanted!" There was suddenly the pathos of a wistful child in the old voice, but on the old face

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was a kind of radiance. Even flyaway Jeanne Laraway was crying, suddenly unashamed.

That night, as Zeb Plants was milking, he said abruptly, as if ashamed of himself and yet somehow compelled,

"Kind of seemed as if the Lord come right into church this morning, didn't it, Mis' Culliton?"

"Yes," said Jen. "It did seem just like that, Zeb!"

CHAPTER VI

JEN STARTS ALL OVER AGAIN

JEN had never, in all her years of hard work on the old Culliton farm, had a doctor for herself. There had been Bess Beamer with her when the babies came, and she had somehow pulled herself through that bleak stretch after Steve died. With that frame, like that of the heroine of some old Norwegian saga, and that face, plain and good and powerful as life ever makes faces, always busy, always cheerful—one never imagined Jen might be sick. She never imagined it herself. If it had not been for the panic of Zeb, she wouldn't have had the doctor this time.

But, one scorching hot day in June, only a month after her birthday party in John Marrow's honor, when Jen came in from the hayfield and started up the steep steps to the loft, she suddenly grew faint, felt a strange, knifelike pain. She sat down heavily on the steps to get her breath and

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to let the dizziness pass. It did not pass. The sweet smell of the hay, the dusty rays of sunlight, the pigeons, Zeb in the doorway—all merged into a sick blackness.

When she came to herself again, on the living-room couch, her first thought was:

"I've had a stroke—like Pa!"

She saw Allie Parsons, her friend and neighbor, Zeb, and Doc Quintzer.

"I've had a stroke!" her mind repeated.

Then she was alone with Doc Quintzer. She had never liked Doc Quintzer—too nose-y and fond of gossip; but his eyes were kindly enough now.

"There, now, you're all right, Mrs. Culliton! Gave us kind of a scare!"

"What is it—a stroke?" Jen asked directly, and was surprised to find her voice such a thin little whispering thing.

The doctor threw back his head and laughed. Jen hated that laugh; he hadn't had to lift her father his last years, feed him, wait on him hand and foot!

"No, no! Nothing like that! You've been running that old engine of yours too hard, that's all that's the matter! Got to let up a little!"

Haying! Great guns, Mrs. Culliton, you ought to have known better!"

"Been haying it for thirty-two years!" Jen said.

"Well, I wouldn't brag about it!" the doctor said shortly. "I'm going to tell you straight from the shoulder, Mrs. Culliton, because that's the way you're used to things. You haven't had a stroke and you aren't even seriously ill—but you can't do the heavy work on the farm any more. It *might* be serious if you did! You're good for thirty years yet, if you take care of yourself!"

"Not—*not do any farm work any more?*"

"Any heavy work! Women can't do men's work and not pay the penalty sooner or later—you or anybody else, Jen Culliton! But you don't need to look as if you'd lost your last friend; you won't have to stop working, except the heavy work out in the fields! Why don't you make a flower garden to fuss in?"

"*Flower garden!*" Jen's face twisted into a little painful grimace.

That was in June. Jen got up the next day and went about her business. She seemed to feel all right, and she laughed now and then, remembering Doc's warnings. But one day she tried to lug a big crock down the outside cellar stairs, and

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she knew, then, that Doc had told the truth. She came, finally, up from the cellar, her tanned face devoid of its ruddiness, her big hands gripping the edge of the stone steps. She got into the kitchen, dropped into the red-padded rocker by the stove. Somewhere, out in the fields, she heard Zeb shouting at the horses, and the sound seemed part of the physical pain that scorched her.

"Done for, am I?" she muttered angrily.

Once before she had let up, had found she hadn't needed to. She knew too well what it had done to her. She had sworn many a time after that to drop in the harness. And now, this. Never again—was she never again to feel the satisfaction of doing things herself? Never again to be the real head of this farm that she had pulled, through hard and painful years, into prosperity?

Jen, sitting there in the old rocker, shook with the rebellion that swept her. Why, she wasn't sixty yet, and sixty wasn't old! To be cast aside at fifty-seven? Just a pile of useless old bones cumbering the earth? Just enough left of her to keep a house tidy, she, who, year in, year out, was up and through with her housework before seven? Just enough strength left to her to putter around

in a flower garden? Flower garden—a job for ailing old maids and silly women with too much time on their hands! Great acres of wheat; snow of the north field buckwheat; weighed down branches of the big orchard! There—there was work for a body! But *flower gardens!* A lilac bush or two, geraniums, maybe a bunch of golden glow—that was all right, but—Jen shivered a little.

It was in October, after a flat, long, tasteless summer, that Jen, in a flare of rebellion, went to the orchard and picked a barrel of apples. It probably wouldn't have hurt her if she hadn't tried to carry the big ladder. Allie, coming 'cross lots, found her sitting at the foot of the tree, looking white and unlike herself. Allie scolded her.

"Why don't you listen to what the doctor says?" she begged.

"Piffle!" said Jen, but her voice was not quite so forceful as usual.

A few days after that, Allie came up with some dahlia roots. Jen, steady as a rock, blazed up at her in sudden irritation.

"Dahlia roots! *Dahlia roots?* What in tunket do I want of dahlia roots? You've got the

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notion, along with Doc Quintzer and the rest of the neighbors, that I'm on my last legs and ought to be preserving my feeble strength by pokin' round in a bunch of posies! Good heavens, Allie, take those old roots and get home with 'em before I speak my mind!"

Allie stared at her, turned and went, bearing her dahlia roots with her, her thin cheeks a dull red. Her shoulders seemed, somehow, more bent.

Jen watched her go.

"There," she said finally, "I've made *her* mad!" Her throat ached horridly as she turned away from the window. Allie had been so good to her all summer, and here she was snapping at her like a snapping turtle!

"What's got into me, anyhow?" she asked herself miserably.

After the fall work was out of the way, it was worse. The snow came early, shut her in more completely. She had more time to think about herself, to rebel. And Allie didn't come over. That probably hurt most. Allie used to come over once a month or so during the winter and spend a day with Jen by the big coal heater, piecing, or sewing carpet rags.

"Should think she might overlook a few care-

less words!" Jen would say to herself as she puttered about the house, dusting where there was no dust, polishing where there was shining brightness. Once she went to the 'phone and called three long and a short—that was Allie.

"H'lo! . . . Is that you, Allie? Say, Allie, do you remember who it was that we was to give our missionary dues to?"

"Mis' Price," said Allie without expression.

Jen waited a second, then reddened. She knew she was waiting for Allie's gentle, "When you coming over, Jen?" It didn't come.

"All right; thanks, Allie!" she said abruptly, and hung up. Well, if Allie didn't want to be friends! But she couldn't eat any supper.

She couldn't eat much that winter anyway. Her clothes got so big for her that they hung on her like shapeless bags. Her skin seemed too loose over her big bones. Her sandy hair became nearly all gray.

She had little to do, little to look forward to. Once she thought she'd write and ask her girl, Marg'ret, down for a month. But she put that thought away. Nothing ahead, nothing! No hand in the spring planting or harvesting! Nothing but dishwashing, making one bed, cooking little

dabs that tasted like sawdust! For Jen, who strode about the farm in man's attire—brusque, businesslike, capable—such a life seemed intolerable. It was useless to tell herself that housework and gardening satisfied most women. She had always lived in the fields, of necessity, but they had become a part of her. Four walls the year around, a picayune little garden— *Bosh!*

Christmas she went up to Marg'ret's. She overheard Margaret confiding to Ed:

"Mother shows her years more this winter, somehow!" Margaret's voice was troubled, and Jen had an impulse to go to her, put her head against her daughter's heart, be comforted. But Jen had always been the one to comfort, and, besides, there was nothing much the matter; Doc had said so. And yet, that "nothing much," that giving up of the vigorous, useful life she had lived for so many years, meant terribly much to Jen.

So she came home, and didn't tell any one anything. She hoped, when she got back from Marg'ret's, that some sign would come from Allie. But she had hurt Allie, and Allie neither called up nor came.

"I'd ought to apologize," Jen said to herself;

but, somehow, in her misery, she couldn't. She hated herself because she couldn't.

And then, one day, just as the sun was getting to the most sheltered hollows, melting their cups of snow, ending this interminable winter, word came that Jen's sister, Caroline, had died. Jen stared at the telegram a long time, unbelievably. Car'line, the baby, *dead*. The first of all the eleven brothers and sisters!

"Not Caroline! Not *Car'line!*" she whispered numbly into the April sunshine. She hadn't seen Caroline in a number of years, for Caroline lived clear down in Maryland; and there were children, four of them; but Caroline had been the baby, such a good, bright little baby!

Jen packed in a daze, thinking all the time of the baby that had seemed, not like a sister, but her own baby. Jen wished, as she folded the clothes carefully, that she'd written oftener—only letters came so hard to her big hands. She remembered the extra chicken she'd sent in their Christmas box, and was glad.

In the morning, before Zeb came to take her to the station, she had a strange desire to call Allie, tell her she was going; but something seemed to hold her hands tight in her lap.

"I'm glad, 'most, Car'line can't see me like this—all worn out and old!" It wasn't altogether a selfish thought, for Caroline had always depended on her so!

She remembered Caroline all the way. Caroline had been such a dainty, frail little thing. It had never been a burden to iron her best ruffled dresses, she had looked so sweet and pretty in them. And she was so quiet and good-mannered at the table! Jen remembered a yellow hair-ribbon that had been lovely on Caroline's dark curls. She remembered, too, the shock she had had when John had wanted to marry Caroline. What—Caroline marry? *That baby!* And now she was gone. The four children—what would they do?

When she got there, the funeral was over. Telegrams came slowly up Jen's road, and it was a day's trip to Caroline's home in Maryland.

There had been six of Caroline's ten brothers and sisters there for the funeral. Three of the girls were there now: Penelope, the teacher one; Mary, who'd married a farmer down Punxutawny way; Julie, the one from New York. Jen saw at once that Julie was taking charge of things—a tall, smart, capable, handsome woman, an organ-

izer of women's clubs, one might say. Mary, a little too fat, had cried till her round face was an ugly red and her eyes swollen. Penelope, a little sharp and school-teacherish, moved among them restlessly, impatiently—she was paying a substitute.

Jen took everything in shrewdly. She saw that Mary's grief was real and overwhelming; she saw that Pen didn't really feel it much, was anxious to get away; she saw that Julie was hurt, but that, too, she was impatient with them all for not getting through with things quicker. She and Julie clashed always somehow—they were both too competent. And she saw the children.

There was Caroline, named after her mother—a big, healthy girl who had tennis cups and a stride not unlike Jen's own. Jen liked her. There were the twins, Joe and Ollie, rather sullen and silent now, in this catastrophe that had come upon them, but, one could see, normally brimming with mischief.

And there was Peter.

Peter was the youngest, seven or so, and he was blind. You hardly noticed him at first, he took up so little room among the big healthy rest of them. He had a thin, too-sensitive little face, and

thin fingers that were always groping. "Poor Caroline—what a cross!" they had all said when they had known first about Peter. He had Caroline's soft curls, almost too soft, too fine, they were, above that tragic, small face. Jen saw how, at the table, he shrank into his place, how he seemed to try to make himself small so no one would see or speak to him. No one did, much. But Jen saw him more than the rest did. Maybe because his hair was like Caroline's, that she had used to smooth and tie so long ago. She saw how he ate, so slowly and carefully, so as not to make spots on the cloth. Once, when he fumbled, dropped a little piece of bread, she saw his fingers tremble.

It was after supper that first night when they really got together and talked. John had gone to his room, shut himself in; the children were in bed.

"He takes on terribly; but he'll get over it," said Julie. "He's the kind that'll get over it quick, too!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Jen. Jen always felt a little antagonistic toward Julie. "He don't look to me like he'd forget in a minute!"

"They all do," said Julie shortly.

"Not all," Jen insisted.

"Well, anyway, we've got to decide about the children! John can't tend to them—he's as helpless as a worm. What's bothering him most now is what'll become of the children."

Jen sat there quietly, feeling somehow dowdy and old beside the rest of them. She looked around at Car'line's room, a comfortable place, a little shabby, with lots of books and easy chairs and such. It almost seemed to her she could see Caroline moving about there, touching the books, filling that blue bowl with flowers, sitting there by the fireplace with the little blind one in her arms. She almost forgot the meaning of Julie's crisp voice. Then Mary's voice, a little thick from many tears.

"I'll take the twins," she said. "There's always food and to spare on a farm—guess we wouldn't notice what they'd eat, and they'll soon be size enough to make themselves useful!"

Jen smiled a little. Mary had always been like that, hiding her generous heart under a lot of practical, meaningless words. And it would really mean something to Mary, too, on that scrubby farm, and with her big brood! Then she became aware that they were all looking at her—wait-

ing. A little frightened wave swept over her. Somehow, she had not just realized what was happening. They were passing Car'line's children around, and they were expecting her to say something, *to take one of them!* Then she seemed to see the girl Caroline's straight shoulders, square chin and direct eyes; she seemed to see her running the farm as she had done. One could see the girl had a backbone for business! Jen made a swift decision, as she always did.

"I'll take Caroline," she heard herself saying in a voice that sounded unlike her own.

She thought that Julie looked disappointed.

"I'd have liked her—if any," Julie said. "Well—there's Peter!" She looked at Penelope.

"Impossible!" Penelope said sharply. "How could I care for a child like—like Peter, with my school!"

"Well, I didn't say you could!" Julie answered. "But it probably wouldn't be any worse for you than for the rest of us!"

"Maybe Charlie would take him," said Pen, flushing a little.

"Charlie? Good heavens, he has six now!"

"Well—there's Rosie!"

"*Rosie!* You know, yourself, she's always ail-

ing! And she can't even sweep a floor clean; you wouldn't want to send any child there!"

"He couldn't see the dirt," Pen murmured. Jen looked at her angrily.

"I don't see how *I* can," Julie said. "I'm nearly always out in the afternoon, and he'd have to have a lot of attention! It—it's unfortunate," she ended lamely. There was an uncomfortable silence. Kind of hard on Peter, Jen thought, nobody wanting him.

"How about Marg'ret and Ed?" Julie turned abruptly to Jen. Jen shook her head.

"They adopted two boys last year," she said. "I don't believe they'd want to take any more now!"

"Do you think Art . . . ?"

Jen shook her head again.

"Art's too busy making money. It'd do him good—but he wouldn't!"

"Well, let's sleep over it," Julie said. "There are a few personal things of Caroline's that she's left to us girls—books, pictures, dishes and so on; we can get them divided up!"

But all the rest of the evening the thought of little Peter hung between them. Jen somehow didn't have the heart to talk over things.

JEN STARTS 'ALL OVER 'AGAIN

"That picture of the Shepherd Boy—I'd like that for my rooms if you girls don't care!" said Pen.

"There's a couple little dishes I give Caroline once on a birthday before she was married," said Mary. "I'd kind of like them!"

Jen didn't say anything. It hurt her, somehow, this division of Caroline's possessions. It hurt her to think of these rooms being changed in any way. Did they think to bring Caroline any nearer by taking them, or—did they want the things themselves?

"Here's a comforter you pieced for her, Jen," they said once. "You better take this!"

"No," said Jen. "No, I don't believe I want it!"

They all looked at her queerly. Did they think she didn't care? But she couldn't explain somehow.

"It's not a bit worn!" said Julie. "I'll be glad for it if you don't want it!"

Jen remembered the winter she had pieced it; she remembered Allie helping her with the pattern. Allie had a lot of good patterns: rising sun, maple leaf, and log cabin, and she was always good about helping you get them together.

Caroline had written such a nice letter about the quilt. Jen remembered the very words of it now; she had let Allie read it, because Allie had seemed to have a share in the giving of it. No, she didn't need the quilt; but she wished she'd called up Allie before she left!

They bade each other good-night a little constrainedly. Some one had to sleep on the cot in the upstairs hall, and Jen said she'd just as soon. They let her, as they had all used to let her do things for them.

The cot was not very easy and it was not quite long enough, and Jen could not sleep. She seemed to see many things: a bare space above the little brown desk, where the Shepherd Boy had been hanging; the maple-leaf quilt on one of Julie's beds; little Peter's fingers trying so hard to manage his fork, his bread, his glass of milk. She felt hard toward Julie and Pen because they didn't want Peter. Julie, with all her money and her useless life—a fritterer, she was—shirking this responsibility! And Pen, getting too scratchy, too fond of her own freedom; why, it would be the making of Pen, to have a child to care for!

Then, through the stillness, she heard a little sound. It was some one sobbing, tight little sobs,

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muffled, maybe, in a pillow. Who slept next her here? The twins—and Peter. She got up softly, went to the door and opened it, ever so gently. The light from the window fell upon the twins, their freckled faces calm and untroubled in sleep. It was Peter! She went over to him.

"There, Peter, don't cry!" she whispered. Peter whirled on her, one small fist doubled, struck at her. Jen only patted him more gently, touched the soft curls.

"Your mamma had curls like yours," she said. "I used to brush them every day—she was such a pretty little girl!"

Peter's taut body grew suddenly still. Jen kept on patting him. At last he slept.

Jen went back to her bed. Poor Peter, poor little blind Peter, more lonesome for his mother than any of them, and nobody wanting him! Nobody! Suddenly Jen sat up in bed, so suddenly that she put her hand up swiftly to her heart. Shirker? Why, *she* didn't want him either! *She didn't want him, either!* It was as if some one had slapped her in the face.

But, heavens, she couldn't. Why, she couldn't! For almost a year now, she'd stuck to her house, fussing over things that didn't matter. She

couldn't, she couldn't take something else to fuss over! Only, of course, a child wasn't a house; but it needed so many little things done—washing, feeding, dressing. And Peter—you'd have to *wait* on him so! And she didn't understand children, she'd been away from them so long! A grown girl like Caroline was different. Now, Pen, she knew children like books! And Julie, didn't she run a children's theater or something? And, besides, she'd taken Caroline, she'd done her share! Still, Julie wouldn't mind taking Caroline!

When dawn came, she got up, tired, still troubled, a little shame in her kind heart.

The shame persisted during breakfast; she was sharp with them all, her eyes would not look directly at them. She remembered the hurt little sobs of midnight, and she was almost ashamed to look at Peter, too, though, of course, Peter couldn't see her. She saw that the rest felt on edge, too. It was too bad, in a way, that this should have come up—they ought all to have felt close now!

After breakfast, Julie went at the dishes, her mouth a little tight. Mary helped her. Jen went out the back door and across the big back

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yard to a rustic seat. It was so warm and everything seemed so new and green. Planting time—but not for her!

Then she saw Peter coming across the grass. He hadn't washed his face since breakfast, and there was a little grimy streak across one cheek. He came slowly, finally stopped where the grass was thickest, curled up there like a kitten in the sun. He seemed to like the sun; such a skinny little thing, of course he did!

He stretched out flat after a while and his little fingers went exploring—grass, clover, cats-paw, sorrel. He groped again, picked a few leaves of sorrel, nibbled them. He put his arms tight to the ground as if he were clinging to it, a strangely beautiful gesture. Then he got up and went over to where the daffodils and hyacinths made a royal band along the fence. He was very near Jen, but she did not speak.

He knelt down by a purple hyacinth, put his cheek down softly against the blossom. Jen saw his sensitive face quivering.

"Good-by, hyacinth!" he said, in a small voice. Then his fingers found a daffodil, caressed it.

"Good-by, daffodil!" he said.

Jen found she was swallowing hard.

Overhead, in the big elm, an oriole began a mad carol. Peter lifted his head, the sadness of his face suddenly lightened. Then the kitchen door banged as Mary came out on the porch to hang up the dish towels. The bird song ceased. The bright face, with its streak across the cheek, drooped again. Then the small fingers touched a tall, white flower, lingered over it, puzzled.

"Good-by—" he began, then frowned a little. He put his nose to it, felt the leaves.

"Star o' Bethlehem!" Jen prompted him gently. She felt mist shutting out the garden as Peter turned to her, startled.

"It's just your Aunt Jen," Jen said quietly. "Come here, Peter!"

He came to her, stood before her, a little frightened, a little defiant, wholly lonely. Caroline, little Caroline and Peter—they were like as two peas in a pod!

"What were you saying good-by to the flowers for?" Jen asked him.

The pitiful hurt in the thin face deepened.

"She said, Aunt Julie, that she'd probably have to take me—I heard her. She said nobody else saw fit to do their duty! And Ollie—Ollie says there are just buildings there, not even grass—

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and *she* let me feel the bulbs of these, and everything!"

Jen hadn't touched him—he was strangely independent for all his helplessness; but suddenly now she reached out and drew him into her arms.

"No, Peter," she said; "no, Peter, you aren't going to your Aunt Julie's! How'd you like a great big garden; how'd you like to help me make it? With marigolds and zinnias and bachelor buttons and four o'clocks—oh, hundreds of flowers! And you could put the seeds in yourself and pat the earth down! And there's a pair of bluebirds builds every spring out in the woodshed eaves! And I need a boy—to help me. I—I'm not so strong as I used to be. I—I need a little boy to help me!"

She held him close, rocked him a little in her arms. It felt strangely sweet to have him there. The old sting of "fussing in a garden" was miraculously gone. Oh, he should have every flower smell there was; he should drink quarts of Jersey milk, and eat crocks of molasses cookies!

Then Peter was whispering something—in a voice choked with tears he had kept back too long.

"But Ollie—Ollie's reading 'The Porcelain

Stove' to me—and—and Car'line plays games with me—even when she's busy—and—and—"

Jen stopped her gentle rocking, was suddenly still, without and within. She seemed to see the big Culliton place with all its empty rooms: the orchard, the big yard, the haymow. Why, there was room enough and to spare!

She saw Caroline under Julie's wing, growing like her. She saw the twins in Mary's crowded house. What chance would they have among so many? None of them just wanted—taken for duty's sake! And her great house, her arms and big hands empty—waiting!

Jen looked down at Peter, at the thin, streaked face and sensitive mouth. What was he doing to her, this little lonely child? *What was he doing to her?* Into Jen's heart crept something big, something holy, something that stirred her from head to foot because of its perfect rightness. The rebellion that had torn her for months was stilled.

She got to her feet, Peter still in her arms, and strode across the lawn.

"Poor skinny little mite—I've still got strength to tote you around!" she thought. The thought was like comforting hands.

Into the kitchen. They were all there—Pen,

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Mary, Julie—resentful, uncomfortable, restless.

“Say, girls,” Jen found her voice rang out cheerfully, as it used to, no self-pitying wail in it now; the voice of a woman who has great acres under her control—only, of course, there wasn’t much she could do on the farm any more. “Say, girls—just got a new idea! How’d it be if I should take *all* the children? Would you mind, Mary? Seems like you’ve got enough to do as ’tis, with all your seven to feed and dress! And Car’line could go to college if she wanted. I’ve got more room ’n I know what to do with, and there’s means to spare; seems kind of a shame not to keep Car’line’s children together, long as it’s any ways possible.”

Through the relief that answered her from all their eyes: Julie’s “No more than she ought to do!” eyes; Mary’s good, “I’d like to, but *’twould* be extra!” eyes, Jen thought, almost pitying:

“They don’t know what they’re doing—they don’t know what they’re doing!”

The next night they drove up from Claremont in the sweet April dusk; Zeb had left the two-seated rig down for them. Peter cuddled close to Jen’s side. Once she let him hold the reins for a while—no danger of old Suke’s going off the

road! When they came near Allie's Jen drew up by the hitching post.

"Got to stop here a minute," she said. "You take charge of Suke, will you, Peter?" She smiled tenderly at the pride in his thin face, smiled back at the sleepy twins and proud, strong young Caroline, an arm about either brother. To make sure, Jen had tied the horse; but little Peter didn't know this, so he held the reins tightly. This having a family, Jen thought—it was a nice feeling! Kind of gave a body backbone again! She strode up the path and round to the side door, opened it, neighborwise, and put her head in.

"H'lo, Allie!" she called. Supper was cooking, a homely, pleasant smell. Allie came to the kitchen doorway, her face a little flushed.

"H'lo," she said. "Is it you, Jen?"

"Yes, it's me! I've been down to Maryland. My sister, Car'line, was took, Allie. I've brought her four back with me to bring up! Say, Allie, have you got that recipe for rhubarb and pineapple preserve handy? I'll be doing a pile of canning this year! And say, have you any seeds to spare? I'm going to have a big garden, and I don't like to depend on store seeds! Do you s'pose it's too late to set out *dahlia* roots?"

CHAPTER VII

DAN MARTIN'S PIG

JEN lifted the lid of the cookie jar and stepped back, startled. She bent again and peered more closely as if suspecting the jar of having sprung a leak somewhere. Bare, shiny sides—bare, shiny bottom—she had baked day before yesterday!

Jen's great shoulders shook with silent, pleased laughter. Jen had counted on the children keeping her busy; but she sometimes thought, these days, that she had never known in the old days what it was to be busy. Just little blind Peter, always groping, he needed so much extra care and loving. And the twins! Heavens, how they went through stockings and pants! It seemed to Jen she always had a needle in her hands—or else a rolling pin. It didn't seem credible, to look at those eleven-year-old, lean youngsters, that they could possibly find room inside them for all the cookies and bread and fried cakes that disappeared weekly! And yet Jen liked it. And when Caroline, sixteen and lovelier than anything

that had ever grown on Culliton soil, came swinging up the road after school (she insisted on walking up from Claremont nights) and called out in her clear, sweet voice, "Hoo—oo, *Aunt Jen!*" some long-empty cup in Jen's big heart seemed filled to overflowing.

But, presently, as she looked at the cookie jar, her laughter ceased. A small, straight line grew between her steady, blue eyes. It seemed there were problems about bringing up children—she'd almost forgotten that they didn't just come up. And the cookie jar represented Joe Crewe's problem.

Jen went to the door and called in her big, hearty voice,

"Joe! . . . Ollie!"

A shock of black hair above two twinkling blue eyes appeared around the woodshed door. A shock of black hair above two sober blue eyes appeared around the barn door.

"Come here, boys!"

They came, quickly enough, and stood before her on the back porch. You had to blink sometimes to be sure you weren't seeing double. And yet Jen knew quite well which was which.

"Boys, I baked on Tuesday," she said, and

waited. Instant comprehension twinkled in Ollie's eyes, darkened Joe's.

Jen watched them steadily. Joe looked away, his mouth suddenly a little sullen. But Ollie grinned up at her, a little ashamed but altogether friendly.

"Well—we was playing pirate out on the raft —'n pirates have to have provisions, don't they?" he dared.

Joe did not look at her. And yet, Jen knew quite well it was Joe who had planned that pirate game. The friendly smile in her eyes vanished.

"Well, yes—s'pose they do, Ollie! But I'd judge pirates was reckless sort of folks, and brave, to boot, and I think they'd take things before folks' eyes, not sneak in like some ordinary robber and steal 'em!"

"Aw, Aunt Jen!" protested Ollie.

But Joe never spoke.

"Well, that's the way I look at it! You're welcome to all you want to eat, goodness knows, but seems like, after this, you kind of ought to give a body warning when you're going to clean out the pantry!"

"All right, Aunt Jen!" Ollie's shamed grin persisted. The shame indicated that he knew he had broken the rules of the game and the grin

indicated that he and Aunt Jen were still good friends in spite of it. But Joe's jaw stuck out a little and he looked down at the rough floor without speaking. Jen turned away, the interview ended, and the boys were off the porch with a whoop.

Jen went into the kitchen slowly and began to get things together for making cookies. But she shook her sandy head ruefully from time to time. Yellow? Was Joe Crewe yellow? It was an ugly thought to Jen, straightforward, unafraid Jen. It gave her a queer sense of responsibility. Selfishness, cowardice, temper—could you take these out of a child? Who was it Joe took after? Any of her folks? She tried to remember her own brothers and sisters. Well, Pen was a little like that—afraid of facing the consequences of what she'd done. And Rosie, too. But Joe was so smart! Why, just this one month he'd gone to the Corners school, he'd brought home the highest marks in his room! Mustn't let him be yellow—couldn't have that! But, somehow, Jen felt troubled. She couldn't just see how you went about it to teach that kind of thing. Food—you could see to it they ate good, nourishing food; you could see that they kept clean and got their

sleep like they should. But to make them stand back of what they'd done, to be afraid of a lie—that was different. How did you go about things like that?

“Hoo—oo, *Aunt Jen!*”

There was Caroline, home from school already, and only the first batch of cookies out of the oven! Caroline came and stood in the kitchen doorway, dropped her books into a chair, helped herself to a crisp, hot cookie. Straight as an Indian, direct as a boy, eager as a little child, lovely as madcap gray eyes, a dimple in her chin, clear skin and a mop of fair, wavy, shingled hair could make a girl! Jen's frown vanished.

“Ten days more!” Caroline stretched her arms relievedly. “And then exams—and the tractor! You *are* going to get it, aren't you, Aunt Jen?”

“We'll see!” said Jen, but laughter stirred her big heart again.

Caroline seemed like a daughter she should have had herself. Well, she *would* try to be a mother to her, poor child! Thank goodness, there weren't many worries about Caroline! Not even boys, it seemed. Jen had turned down three boys from town who'd wanted to work on a farm for the summer. Queer, she'd thought at first,

this interest in rural affairs by those smart-alecky town boys! But when she'd told Caroline about the first one, Caroline had flushed ever so faintly and laughed.

"Aren't boys silly?" she'd said. So Jen saw the light.

It was a good thing. Plenty of time for that later! There was one sort of nice boy right up the Swale, who had taken a shine to Caroline, too. Dan Martin. Dan had stopped in, not half an hour ago, to ask about something unimportant. Jen grinned a little.

"Danny Martin was just here!" she said aloud.

Caroline picked up her books.

"Guess I'll plug a little on Virgil before supper, unless you need me. Do you?" she asked.

Jen grinned again. "No, run along!" she said. She chuckled aloud as the cookie cutter came down with its precise, "*Clu-ick! Clu-ick! Clu-ick!*" Independent as a hog on ice, she thought! She chuckled again, remembering the second Sunday night they'd gone down to the Corners church. The first time, Danny had just stared at her across the aisle. The second time, though he'd been away to college and was as up-to-date as anybody, he'd stepped out from the line at the

door like any country bumpkin and said, "May I see you home, Miss Crewe?"

"Why, Aunt Jen's here!" Caroline said surprisedly, and the line snickered.

But the next Sunday night Dan had stepped out again.

"May I see you home, Miss Crewe?" he asked.

Caroline had looked at him a little bewilderedly, but she'd only shaken her head and walked on. Jen had taken a liking to Danny then—he had a backbone, that boy! Besides, he'd left college just before graduating, to dig in on the old farm after his father died. Yes, he was an up-and-coming boy—and handsome, too! And he was awfully kind to Peter. He'd brought him a book for the blind and helped him to get started on it. But, still, she was pleased about Caroline and laughed about it to herself every now and then. Plenty of time—plenty of time!

But that wasn't Joe's case, and Jen thought a lot about Joe the next few days. She thought about him Sunday when the sermon was going on, and she happened to note during Sunday School (the Bible class in the choir seats overlooked the rest of the room), that Joe failed to put his nickel

in the collection. She forgot the hardships of the children of Israel, to mull over *that*. She gave the boys money—ten cents a week. Not much, but enough for little boys to spend on foolishness, and she hadn't been stingy with them. Well, maybe there was some special thing that Joe was hankering for! She'd find out!

But she didn't find out. Joe volunteered the information that he'd lost his nickel and Jen set her jaws tight, looked at him steadily a moment and said nothing. Of course, there were whippings, old-fashioned but effective, but Jen shrank from that, somehow. It didn't just seem fair when she was such a big horse of a woman and Joe was such a little boy! Still, this couldn't go on, couldn't possibly go on! She wouldn't have minded his taking the nickel so much—boys sometimes want things terribly—but she didn't like his hiding behind a tale of losing it. She asked Caroline, as they drove to evening service, if she knew of anything special the boys wanted, but Caroline didn't.

This night Dan Martin was waiting out near where the buggies were hitched. He said, "Hello, Mrs. Culliton! Can't Miss Crewe go up with me in the car?"

Jen hesitated.

"Why, I don't mind, Dan, but I don't know about her! You'd better ask her!"

Caroline looked a little impatient.

"I guess not . . . not to-night," she said, but slowly.

Jen laughed as she climbed into the buggy.

"Hangs on like a beggar-tick, don't he?" she said.

"He looks kind of nice, but boys get to be such a nuisance!" Caroline answered.

Jen was silent, remembering Dan's face in the light of the lantern. Dan wasn't a boy, she reflected, more soberly.

It was only a couple days later that Dan called up Jen.

"Say, the Grangers are farming out pigs to the school boys!" he said. "How about Joe and Ollie? Would you let them have one? Keep 'em till November and get half!"

He waited and Jen had a swift remembrance of his face last Sunday night.

"Well," she said good-naturedly, "I s'pose there's more'n one way of skinning a cat, Danny! Bring your pig along!"

Dan laughed and did not pretend to misunder-

stand. He wasted no time about it. He brought the pig that night about supper time. It was a red pig, and Jen thought she'd never seen a home-lie, but Joe and Ollie fell upon it rapturously. Even Peter had to feel its bristles, grab at its little, impertinent tail.

"Aunt Jen, can we build a pen for it? Can we? Aw, we don't want that old pen—we could build one better'n that! There's some boards out in the barn! Can we? Where's the hammer, Aunt Jen?"

They raced off through the late June afternoon to the barn, Joe with the little red pig squealing and struggling under his arm. Peter trotted along beside them and Ollie gave him a hand to cling to.

Jen had forgotten that boys cared so about animals—she was glad she'd let Dan bring the pig, though she'd always thought pigs a nuisance. Dan seemed glad, too. He sat down on the back steps and asked Jen questions about all sorts of things. Folks *did* ask Jen things, but not generally boys like Danny Martin. Boys don't like to be told things. But Dan was humble and eager and Jen felt curiously warm toward him. He had a way of tossing his dark hair from his

eyes that was very boyish and appealing. But Jen kept wondering how long he could keep up this pretense of intensive interest in farm matters when all the time he was wondering where Caroline was and whether he was going to get a chance to talk to her. Jen finally took pity on him.

"Caroline!" she called. Caroline came and stood in the doorway. "Come on out and visit with Dan a minute while I finish getting the dishes done! Danny's seen we needed a pig to keep us contented with life, so he's brought one over!"

She saw the triumphant look that flashed from Dan's eyes up to Caroline and Caroline's instinctive, swift defiance.

"Hello!" was all Dan said.

"Hello!" was all she said.

But she went out and sat down. And, presently, out of the softness of the June twilight, Jen heard little disconnected scraps floating.

"Wouldn't you like a pig to raise, too?" from Dan.

"Me? I've got Ollie and Joe!"

Then—

"There's a Grange social Saturday night!"

"Is there?" indifferently.

"Wouldn't you like to go? They dance!"

"Aunt Jen's going to get a tractor! If I get through my exams, I can drive it Saturday!"

Jen chuckled above the dish pan. She wondered if Caroline was really as indifferent as she sounded. If she'd been hankering to attract Dan's notice, she couldn't have done better!

"Well, so long, Mrs. Culliton!" he called in to her presently. Jen went to the doorway.

"I'll stop in again soon, see how my pig's growing!" he said, and he had the courage to grin understandingly at Jen as he said it.

"Yes, pigs need lots of overseeing," Jen agreed gravely.

It seemed she spoke more truly than she knew. The red pig seemed to have some demon under its bristly red skin. He was the cause of contention, of lies and of all manner of things foreign to the peaceful Culliton household. In the first place, both the boys wanted to feed him. They quarreled over it.

"Goodness gracious—never knew anybody to hanker so over tossing out a little swill!" Jen said. "If you can't take turns, peaceable, I'll feed him myself!"

That stilled them at first, but presently Jen found out that Joe sneaked out and fed the pig

before time, so that he got a double dose. She stepped on that and felt sorely inclined to spank Joe. Then they had a notion that they wanted a clean pig, and they scrubbed him with Jen's stiffest scrubbing brush till the hide was almost rubbed off. They quarreled over which should do the front legs, and Ollie threw the pail of hot suds on Joe. Then they fought in the mud of the pig-pen while Balboa (the rusty pig) nosed at the scrubbing brush and Ollie's brand new blouse was torn clean off him.

Jen called up Dan, in the presence of the twins.

"Dan, I wish you'd come down and get your pig!" she said. "He's like a bone between two dogs—and he'll bankrupt me!"

The twins fell upon her beseechingly.

"Well," she relented into Dan's laughter, "never mind—guess the boys are going to straighten out after all!"

"I'd better drop in and see about it!" Dan suggested eagerly.

"Yes, it probably would be well!" Jen said dryly.

Dan dropped in on the average of three or four times a week to see how the pig was getting on. For that—or something. Sometimes Caro-

line talked with him briefly; generally she was nowhere about. But every Sunday night he put his question till everybody around was laughing at him about it. Finally Caroline grew angry. He had come in to see Balboa, was out by the pen, when Caroline, in knickers and a worn middy, came in from the fields. She stopped and flushed a little through her tan when she saw Dan. Dan forgot Balboa, came toward her, his handsome, thin face lighted, his blue eyes eager.

"Hello!" he said. Somehow, they never seemed to find much to talk about.

She paused but did not answer.

"Hello!" he said again, with exaggerated emphasis.

She gave him a small, scornful grin, strangely like Jen's.

"When do you do your farm work?" she asked pointedly.

Jen got lots of fun out of such of these encounters as she overheard. They snapped. And Caroline always carried off honors. But Jen sometimes felt, when Dan stepped up Sunday nights in the face of the Corners boys, that he was advancing under fire and deserved a medal for it. Of course, it was only kids' nonsense,

anyway. Jen remembered one day, with something of a shock, that her sister Rosie had been married when she was sixteen.

"You—and your silly pig!" Caroline said to Dan. "If you aren't at church, you're hanging over the pigsty!"

Dan, himself, looked a little angry at that, but it didn't stop his coming.

Then the pig disappeared. He had rooted his way out twice before but the twins had found him over under Zeb Plants' apple trees and had brought him home. It was after one of these exploring expeditions that Caroline named him "Balboa."

This time, however, Balboa was gone. He was not over at Zeb's nor yet out under the hazelnut trees. Jen, herself, called up all the neighbors and walked all over her big farm searching for him. But Balboa was gone, red hide and bristly hair of him! Peter became disconsolate. He wandered gropingly about the farm, calling "*Boa! Boa! Boa!*" in his high, lonely voice. But there was no 'Boa. Jen insisted that Joe and Ollie tell Dan about it. They didn't want to, but she made them do it. They didn't have to go up to Dan's, though, for Dan stopped in on one of his periodic

pig-inspection visits. Jen watched the twins with curious eyes. Ollie looked ashamed and embarrassed, but Joe only sullen and resentful. Jen saw Ollie nudge Joe and saw Joe edge away from him. It was Peter, though, who said to Dan, his little chin not quite steady.

"Boa's gone!"

"Gone?" Dan's eyes went in swift question to Jen.

"Dug out—beat it!" Ollie came to life then, and bravely, too. "Dunno as I fixed that board I was a-going to!"

"Is that right? Oh, he's probably just under the barn or somewhere close—come on out, let's look!"

They trailed out to the barn, Peter's hand in Dan's. Dan always could take Peter about with him just as if he saw like the rest! But Jen noticed that Joe was at the end of the line and that he sat down on the step inside the barn and did not join in the hunt.

They did not find Balboa.

"Queer!" Jen thought over and over. "Don't see how a pig could just vanish that way!"

It was over a week later when Jen first noticed something strange. First she observed that

Joe was very quiet. Usually ready to raise the roof, was Joe! But suddenly he was still, still and moody. He jumped when you spoke to him quickly, and he wasn't eating. Jen gave him castor-oil and made him go to bed early a couple of nights. But Joe still moped and left dabs of this and that on his plate.

"Maybe he's worrying about the pig, for all he was so cool and ugly about it!" Jen thought, and she was very gentle with him. Maybe, after all, he took things harder than she'd thought. But then, one day she went out to the barn after a certain good, pine board to make another shelf for the fruit cellar. She knew just where the board was—over against the apple bins with some other old lumber. But when she came to the bins, there was no pine board there, nor any lumber, either! Jen frowned, puzzled. It had been there, not two weeks ago, for she'd stumbled over it one day. She looked all around the barn, thinking she might be mistaken. But the lumber was gone.

It was that very night that Jen spoke to Caroline about Joe.

"Caroline," she said, "I feel kind of worried about Joe! He ain't starting off right. Don't

know if he isn't happy here—or if he's grieving for his mother too much, or what! But he does queer things, things a Culliton or a Crewe oughtn't to be doing. It ain't so much the mischief he does—boys are meant for mischief—but I don't like the way he sneaks out of things! Cookies or boards or what, he lets somebody else take the blame! Seems like you can't get under his skin. Kind of hard, he is. Feel like I'm falling down on my job with Joe!"

"Oh, he isn't hard—not really!" protested Caroline. "Once, when I broke my arm, he stayed in from play every day to play games with me! And you know how he always gives things up for Peter! But he is hard to understand—harder than Peter, really! . . . Why, look, Aunt Jen!"

Out through the dusk of the orchard a small figure in khaki overalls was stealing. In his hand was a pail! Caroline put an excited hand on Jen's arm.

"Why, *he knows where Balboa is!*" she whispered.

Jen's smile was a little grim.

"So he does!" she said.

When Joe came in, Jen spoke to him quietly.

"Joe," she said, "have I ever lied to you?"

Joe looked at her, startled, shook his head.

"Well," said Jen, "I never thought that one of Car'line Crewe's boys would ever lie to me! There's more'n one way of telling a lie—there's words that tell what ain't true and there's a kind of keeping still that's just as much of a lie as the other! I'd rather have the word kind 'n the other, if it comes to a choice. Not so sneaky, like! Joe, what was the idea of your not telling you knew where Balboa was?"

Joe was looking at her now, his jaw thrust forward, his eyes stubborn and angry.

"Who said I knew where he was? Ain't I been hunting for him for two weeks, steady? I don't know anything about him!"

Jen looked back at him. The stubbornness seemed to waver.

"Well, I don't!" he repeated, in absurdly guilty defiance.

"You may go up to bed now," Jen said in a dangerously quiet voice. For an instant, Joe's eyes blazed up at Jen, but he turned and went upstairs without answering.

Later, when Jen went in to see if the window was up, Joe was asleep, but his face and pillow

were stained with tears. Jen stood looking at him a long moment, her big face working a little, compassionately.

"Poor, stubborn little rascal!" she said.

But next morning there was no trace of repentance in Joe's eyes. He sat down at the table with a kind of scornful bravado. But he only ate a bite of oatmeal. He swallowed his milk in one long gulp, and was off. He didn't come home at dinner time, though Jen called and called and sent Ollie off back of the barn to fetch him.

"Oh, he'll come, soon as his stomach's empty!" said Caroline. "Don't wait for him!"

After dinner, Jen called up Dan.

"Found your pig, Dan!" she said, briefly.

"Have you? Where?" asked Dan.

"Joe's got it somewhere—we don't know where! Mebbe you'd ought to come up and talk to 'im!"

"Try to get up to-night," Dan answered.

It seemed that Joe's stomach didn't tell him it was dinner time at all that day. He didn't come home. Jen began to be worried about him. She went out and called, in her big voice that carried clear to the north field.

"Joe! Hoo-oo—*Joe!*"

But no defiant, sullen, blue-eyed Joe came running across the fields. Jen sent Ollie out again. But Ollie couldn't find him.

Peter came once and pulled at Jen's apron.

"Is Joe lost?" he whispered.

"No, no, Peter!" Jen said quickly, but there was a little fear in her to match the fear in Peter's voice.

And then Caroline came running in.

"Aunt Jen, Aunt Jen! I've found Joe—and the pig! Come on!"

Jen hurried out with her and down through the orchard.

"He's made a pen, and a little shack—up in the woods back of the north field!"

"Good land!" said Jen. But she was wondering what she was going to say to Joe. Somehow, she knew, it was more than the pig—it was Joe's whole life at stake! If a boy's a coward and a sneak at eleven, he's pretty apt to be a coward and a sneak at five times eleven! What could she do about it? Nothing? Couldn't a big, able woman, honest as she knew how to be, make a little boy see that this wasn't going to get him anywhere? She thought of Peter's—"Is Joe lost?" Was he, maybe, lost to her anyway?

Couldn't she ever find the way to him again?

Then—"Sh!"—from Caroline. "Look—over there through the woods!"

And, sure enough, there was a little shack, the new pine board showing white between two old boards. There was the little pen and there was Balboa, nosing around in the dirt! They were close before they realized that some one else was there with Joe. Then they heard voices from behind the shack. They paused, uncertain. Joe's voice shrilled out then—hot, hurt, defiant.

"Well, what's one little pig to you—you've got dozens of 'em! And I never had a pet yet! And Mother promised me—all last year—that I could have a dog of my very own! 'N'—'n' then—" He burst into sudden, ashamed sobs. "Anyhow, Nip liked Ollie best, 'n' always went places with him—'n' I didn't have *nothing*—not nothing! And, anyhow, 'Bo liked me—'n' I ain't going to have him killed! I'll take him clear off somewheres! I'll—I'll"—his voice broke on a high note.

Then Dan Martin's voice, quite a man's voice, and yet curiously gentle and understanding.

"But, Joe, it wasn't your pig. It was mine—just loaned to you! Business men don't treat

loans that way, and I was making you my partner in that loan business! Don't think you've been very fair to your partner, have you, old man? And, if you wanted a pet, why didn't you say so? Your Aunt Jen's reasonable and looks mighty kind to me! Maybe she'd have got you a pet! And, anyhow, Joe, it doesn't pay—it doesn't pay!"

"But," Joe's voice had a gulp in it, "but 'Bo follows me 'round just like a dog! I—I tell you—he likes me!"

"Well, so do *I* like *you*, Joe, and it makes me feel kind of bad to have you fall down on me this way, when I was counting on you! No matter how much you wanted 'Bo, wouldn't you have felt kind of yellow every time you thought he wasn't really yours by rights? I'll tell you, Joe, you can't always get what you want, right off. You're my partner, so I'm going to tell you—I want your sister, Caroline. But I know she isn't grown up yet, so I've got to wait—and wait! But she's worth waiting for, forever! And, if you wait long enough and work for it, you could probably get a pet of your own. Save your nickels and dimes, and you'll get enough, sure as anything! Doesn't that sound square, old man?"

"Yeuh," Joe said huskily. "Only—only seems as if it's darn hard to be honest sometimes!"

"So 'tis," Dan said soberly. "So 'tis! But it's worth it, Joe! And if it means a kind of a fight inside, why, you feel all the cleaner afterward! I—I have to fight sometimes, too, pardner—you see, Caroline doesn't seem to like me much—and I—I want like the very dickens to be friends with her! But I'm not quitting! Not till doomsday! And I don't like you to be a quitter, either, Joe!"

"But I never *saw* such a good red pig!" Joe protested.

"I'll tell you, Joe—up at our house, I've got two new Shepherd pups. They're beauties—Rags and Tags, I call 'em! Maybe we could go pardners in this quitting business, too. How'd you like those dogs, you and Ollie? If your Aunt Jen'd let you? Of course, I wouldn't want Rags and Tags to go to anybody that wasn't a regular, square kind of a fellow, though! Not to any one that was afraid to say so if they'd done what wasn't right!"

"Well, I *wanted* to tell, anyhow!" burst out Joe. "Ollie *could've*, but seemed like my mouth 'd shut right up tight when I got ready!"

"That's the way 'tis sometimes, Joe—I feel like that some days when I get a chance to talk to Caroline and not anything sensible 'll come out of me! Well, I'll tell you, Joe, I'll bring the pups down to-morrow and if I see you out by the mail box, I'll know everything's all squared up! Shall we shake on it, pardner? Why, there, kid! There! Don't cry, old man! You'll love those pups—one of 'em's got a star on his nose! He's Rags and he's loads better 'n a pig! Why, you poor, lonesome little kid, you!"

Jen put up a sleeve across her eyes. She turned and went softly across the grass, Caroline beside her, her dancing eyes blurred with tears.

"Why, the poor little young 'un! The poor little young 'un!" Jen kept saying.

On the steps sat Peter.

"Did you find 'im?" he begged. "Did you find 'im, Aunt Jen?"

Jen gulped.

"He wasn't lost, Sonny!" she said. "He'll be right in!"

It was not till Jen came into the boys' room that night, though, that Joe unloaded his boy's heart to her. She came and bent over the bed, smiling at him a trifle wistfully, feeling almost

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more tender to him than she ever had, even to little blind Peter! Perhaps her smile did it. At any rate, Joe suddenly put up his two strong young arms about Jen's neck, jerked out his confession in bald, unextenuating sentences.

"I stole 'm—'Bo!" he said. "I made a pen for him up in the woods! 'N I lied about it!"

Jen held him close against her big heart.

"Well, well, Joe! Never mind! Never mind! Just so's you tell your Aunt Jen! You're a brave boy, Joe — there, there — now go to sleep, Honey!" She kissed him swiftly and went out.

A great weight seemed gone from her heart. Joe was going to go straight.

But the next night a little worried line came again between Jen's sandy brows. If it wasn't one thing, it was another—when you had children. Of course, she'd encouraged Dan right along; she was really to blame. And yet, to see seventeen grow up—there was something solemn and almost frightening in the thought.

For, when Danny Martin stepped up to Caroline after church and asked, as usual, "May I see you home?" Caroline looked up at him with a strangely sweet new shyness.

"Why, I don't mind!" she said softly.

CHAPTER VIII

CAROLINE CREWE

YES, if 'twasn't one thing, it was another. And now it was Caroline. It was Caroline for several years to come. Not that it was all worry. When Jen brought the children to live with her, she had expected work and worry and fussing. She had received youth and laughter, loving dependence, mischief and joy to live continually with her. And not the least of these was laughter. There hadn't been much time for laughter in Jen's busy life and, besides, she had been alone so many years, and lone folks don't laugh much. There hadn't been much to laugh about after Steve's losing fight with pneumonia, nor in the struggling years before the children were grown, nor in the bleak days after her son, Phil, died, way out west. Nor in the feeling of isolation and unwantedness after she had made the Culliton place the best farm in Alleghany County, only to be told she hadn't the strength to work it like a man any more. She had a small,

dry grin that was reflected in a slight crinkling of the eyelids, but laughter, that was foreign to her.

But with Caroline, Ollie and Joe, and little blind Peter in possession of the old house, Jen learned laughter. Not from Peter, perhaps. His very happiness brought tears to your eyes. But Ollie and Joe kept chuckles eternally rising.

And Caroline! It was Caroline who was Jen's greatest joy. She had a humor to match Jen's own—dry, but keen. Her gray eyes snapped with youth and devilment. Just the swing of her straight, boyish body as she came up over the hill from school, made pleased laughter well up within.

"You ought to have a tractor!" she announced, her first summer there.

"The horses—they've done pretty good!" Jen said dryly. "And who in tunket around here 'd run it, anyhow? Zeb's no hand with machinery!"

"I'll run it," Caroline said casually. Jen gasped. It was Jen herself, to a "T," but she had never really seen herself in a mirror before and she didn't recognize herself. It was after she got the tractor that one day she was out in the barn and heard Caroline outside talking to the machine.

"Why, you ornery little devil!" Caroline was saying exasperatedly. "What've you been doing with your innards, anyway? Did you swallow that screw? Did you? Why, you greasy old ignoramus, stop your coughing in my face like that! Run, darn you! Do you think I'm going to tell Aunt Jen I can't make you go? Oh, sweet baby—*there you spin!*"

Jen sat down on a bag of potatoes and shook with mirth. And when Caroline ran the tractor into the chestnut tree up in the north lot, trying to see how fast she could make it across the field and back, she laughed again, though it cost twenty-three dollars and fifty cents to get the machine fixed. Caroline came straight to Jen that time, but Jen knew, by the little catch in her voice, that the girl was frightened.

"Tillie," (that was the tractor) "Tillie thought she was a squirrel!" she said.

Once Zeb said, "Mis' Culliton, that there Caroline 'll have me white headed! I can't run a farm with her underfoot!" But, soon after that, Zeb fixed up a fence Caroline had broken with Tillie, and never said a word to Jen.

Caroline went to college that first fall.

"I'd just as lief stay here, Aunt Jen," she said,

a little stubbornly. Jen warmed to that, but she was quite firm about it.

"No, you need to be made more ladylike," she said. "You'll be another Jen Culliton if you don't look out!"

"I wouldn't mind," Caroline said, soberly, for her, as she stared out the back window at the golden rod and gentians August-fringing the orchard.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Jen. "Nobody wants to know the neighbors are laughing when you go by, saying—'There goes that big horse, Jen Culliton—wonder she wouldn't wear skirts instead of overalls when she's on the public highway!' I never had a chance to get my awkward bumps knocked off—but here *you* are running around the fields and hills like a wild deer! No, you got to go to college, Caroline! I've hired a dress-maker from town—the one folks say is real good—and we're going to get your clothes in shape this week!"

Jen laughed all through that session, and others, of dressmaking. Caroline was so impatient of furbelows.

"Oh, not a sash, Aunt Jen! If you make me have a fussy thing like that, I'll flunk every exam

the first term!" she burst out once. But, when she saw the disappointment past Jen's amusement, she pretended to be resigned.

"Oh, well—if you want me to make a ninny of myself!" she conceded. "I'll look awkward as a rail fence, but maybe it's necessary for my social development!"

But the last day before she went away, she put on some shabby knickers and an old sweater and went off up the hill, all alone. She was gone three hours and Jen saw, when she came back, that there were tear streaks on her cheeks. Jen was finishing packing the trunk when Caroline came and stood in the doorway. For the time, Caroline had lost her independence and her sense of humor.

"If Mother hadn't wanted it so—I'll be darned if I'd go!" she said, her young, gay voice a husky whisper. Jen straightened.

"Why, honey," she said slowly, "you don't have to go if you feel like that!"

But Caroline had got it out, that word "Mother"—it was all she wanted. She'd never talked of her mother, had seemed happy enough this summer, but Jen saw now that the hurt had gone tragically deep. It wasn't what Caroline

had said, but that she'd said anything, that her hurt had had to come out some way.

"Your mother always was one to love books!" she said tenderly. "I remember once her trading a red hair-ribbon for a book of fairy stories. My boy, Phil—he took after her!"

That was like Jen, to know that to speak of her own hurt would ease Caroline's, if ever so little.

Caroline got through with the going all right after that. She had a great romp with the boys after supper and told Peter five stories. At the last minute, she came up from the cellar, pretending to hide something behind her back.

"Well, I'm going to take it!" she laughed. "Do you think I want to starve down there?"

"It" was a jar of Jen's strawberry preserves!

So Jen loved Caroline—and small wonder. She was more her daughter than Margaret had ever been, even than Daphne.

Caroline wrote home from college that she had worn *the* dress to a dance and that it was a knock-out. "The men followed me about in droves!" she said, "but tell Tillie I'm still true to her!"

Jen missed her enormously, but there were the twins and Peter, and she seemed to keep pretty

busy, even though the heavy work of the farm was denied her now. Little Peter worshiped Caroline and Jen found herself trying to make up to him his loss. She had never been much on stories, but she found that—"Once, when I was a little girl—" held a sure magic, and she was surprised to find how many, many things came clear to her out of childhood and how pleasant the telling of them seemed. And then, before she knew it, it was close to Christmas and she found it was almost worth while having Caroline away that they might have the joy of preparing for her return.

It was in Caroline's Junior year that Jen grew troubled about her. It was because of Dan Martin. There had never been any question about what Dan thought of Caroline, not since the first time he had sat across from her at the little Corners church, but there was always a question as to what Caroline thought of Dan. Jen had laughed about Dan at first, but when Caroline was about nineteen, Jen saw it was nothing to laugh about. Dan loved Caroline too much. And Jen liked the boy—he was so earnest, so good-looking, and he loved the farm so. But Caroline never seemed to care much about boys. There were

generally plenty of letters for her in the summer time and one Christmas some red roses were delivered to her, way from the city. But Caroline only answered a letter occasionally, and once, when a handsome boy in a big car stopped at Jen's on a July day, Caroline said, "Oh, bother!" and ran off through the orchard with Ollie to go fishing. Jen liked that, and at first had some good laughs over Caroline's indifference and independence.

But once Jen came down to see about some windows after Caroline had come up to bed, and she found Dan Martin still sitting on the front steps, a grotesque, tragically humped-over shadow in the night light.

"Why, Danny!" she said hesitatingly. But Dan got to his feet with a queer choking sound and flung himself across the lawn without answering. Jen tried, next day, to speak to Caroline about it.

"It don't do to let a boy tag after you for years and then step on him," Jen said, a little sternly.

"I'm not urging any one to tag after me," Caroline said, a little hotly.

"You're not keeping any one away," said Jen. "There's plenty of girls that'd like Danny Martin

and if you wouldn't—why, what's the sense of being a dog in the manger?"

"Dog in the manger!" echoed Caroline angrily. "Why, I've told him and told him not to come! He—he—why, he knows I don't want to marry—ever! He says he's willing to be just pals—like always!"

Jen looked at her, startled.

"Don't want to marry?" she said. "You mean just now—or ever?"

"Ever," repeated Caroline. "I want to teach. Oh, not regular high-school teaching—but in an agricultural school somewhere—make *girls* love farms, help turn out women that can manage land!"

"Why, Caroline," Jen said, touched, "that would be a great job for some—there's need for it—but that ain't your job! You mean have a— a career, I take it. But you was meant for a farm of your own, Caroline—babies and the like!"

"Babies?" queried Caroline scornfully. "And maybe be hurt—like Mother was about Peter—and maybe not be happy? Oh, you've had your chance—you've had a career!"

"*Me? A career?*" said Jen in faint amazement.

"Well, haven't you? How do you know what's

best? I heard this place used to be scrubby and run down and not good for much but huckleberries and look what you've done to it! How do you know it's best to sit back and raise babies and watch the men do all the pleasant, big things?"

"Well, I know," Jen said, a little grimly. "I don't know as I can tell you, but I know. And Danny's a good boy, Caroline—he's an awful good boy! There aren't many hereabouts that's your equal in learning or gumption—but Danny is. You'd make a wonderful team, you two!"

Caroline turned away then without answering but Jen saw that her eyes were smoldering with anger. She felt uncomfortable, as if she had said too much. She tried, afterward, to show a little of her heart to Caroline.

"There was days when from morning till night I had to leave the baby with Phil—and he no more than a baby himself," she said once. "Sometimes, seemed as if I'd never pull through!"

"Yes—but you did," said Caroline.

Jen's big heart cried out then with all the misery of those hideous days without Steve, with the lonely ache that still surged through her at the thought of him, with the hurt of those long months of drudgery before she could spare time

for the babies (and then to find them grown!). But words came slowly to Jen—she couldn't get this out to Caroline, somehow. And, of course, she had made a success of the farm, and had found pleasure in it.

But when Danny Martin came and helped himself to her cookies as freely as Ollie or Joe, when he found hours from his full day to take Peter to the woods, when he brought Caroline a coral pin for her birthday and she wouldn't take it, Jen could have taken him into her arms and cried over him. Dan was making good on the old farm, but slowly. But, with Caroline beside him! Then Jen wondered if, maybe, she wasn't being plain selfish, wanting Caroline to take Dan just so she'd be near her.

But Jen saw that Caroline, for all her youthful loveliness, was growing more brusque, more independent, more self-sufficient as the months went by. It hurt her, somehow, but she seemed powerless to do anything about it. She tried to bring back memories out of her early married life for Caroline—to make her see that those were the things she clung to, not the evidences of her present prosperity.

"That's the rocker I used to set in to rock Phil

when he was sick one time," she said once. "He was a dreamy little boy, like Peter—seems like boys like that have more heart. Phil always remembered my birthday and all the things I ever said I liked!"

Or,

"Steve and I set out that rosebush the fall before the baby came. We didn't have time for no honeymoon—it being planting time when we got married, and we had to make little places from time to time to fit together for a honeymoon. It—it was one of 'em then!"

But, though Caroline saw that Jen was hurting herself by telling these things, she didn't see just what Jen meant. She even thought once that her Aunt Jen was getting on in years, calling to mind old things like that. Jen, with her clear, keen mind! Jen saw what Caroline thought, and it grieved her. If she hadn't loved Caroline so much—but she could see so clearly the lonely years ahead, she knew so well how the career would pall, be it ever so useful, and she knew, too, that Dan was the man for Caroline Crewe. When they were together in a room, there was a spark that seemed to flash from one to the other. Caroline, for all her cool, mocking friendliness,

cared more for Dan than she would admit. If she could only be made to see!

Then Caroline and Dan had a quarrel. It was in August, before Caroline was to go back for her last year at college. Tillie was at the root of it, really.

Dan had come over to see if the threshers would be through to come up to his place next day. Caroline came in from the field as he stood in the doorway talking to Jen. Caroline was laughing as she hurried toward them, but her cheeks stung with an angry red.

"Want a hammer and a couple boards," she announced briefly—and then she began to laugh again, laugh till she almost cried. Jen and Dan laughed with her before they even knew the cause.

"Oh, Aunt Jen—it's that old Bert Pettigrew! He—he came over from his place—you know where the fence gaps there—and he—*he asked me to marry him!* That old skinflint! And—and I got so mad—he—he put his old hand on my arm—and I—I told him to get off your land! And—and when he didn't go I—*I chased him through the fence with Tillie!*"

Jen laughed till she was weak, sinking down

into the old, red-padded rocker by the kitchen stove. Old Bert Pettigrew, who always had his own way, and Caroline, chugging threateningly after him with Tillie!

Then they both became aware that Dan Martin was not laughing. He stood in the doorway, staring at them, his eyes deep blue wells of hot flame.

"Blame funny joke!" he said finally. "Damn funny! I could split my sides over how I've loved you and how you've laughed at me! I beg to inform you, however, that there'll never arise any necessity for you to *chase me with Tillie!*"

He turned and went down the back steps and home. Perhaps you wouldn't call it a quarrel, for that was all there was of it. Dan never came near the house again, never even came to say good-by before Caroline went back to college. If Caroline was sorry, she never said so. She pretended that Dan meant nothing whatever to her, one way or the other, but Jen noted that last swift look Caroline swept round the station platform, and her heart was more troubled than ever.

Along about Thanksgiving time Caroline wrote that the very chance she had wanted was hers. It would mean that she had to go out to Indiana,

but it was a small college and she was to have a free hand. She could hardly wait to start in. Jen tried to tell herself it was all right, that things would work out in the end. But, in her heart, she knew things wouldn't work out. Caroline was young, but she was stubborn; she was enthusiastic, she hung onto her ideas like burdocks hung onto Nip. And there was that leaning toward bossing, toward overindependence. Things like that grow on one; they never get less. And some day, maybe not yet, but in the years past thirty or forty, Caroline was going to know she'd been wrong. If only she could show her, somehow.

Jen wrote a letter or two to Caroline about it.

"I'd rather, a million times over, have been your mother, Caroline, even to going young as she did, than to be your Aunt Pen or your Aunt Julie! They think life's some kind of a show to squeeze fun out of—not to put themselves into," she wrote once. Caroline would have liked that, but she never saw it, for it looked kind of senseless to Jen after she'd written it and she tore it up.

And, before she got anything that she thought remotely expressed her feelings, down on paper, Caroline was home for Christmas.

Jen hoped, driving up from the station, that Caroline was remembering last Christmas, Danny Martin bringing her up to the house. But Caroline didn't mention Dan. She didn't need to.

"We got the tree this morning!" Ollie announced excitedly. "Joe and me cut it!"

"I helped draw it down!" Peter put in eagerly.

"There's a million letters and packages but Aunt Jen won't let us open any!" said Joe.

"There was one somebody put on the back steps last night for you. Bet it was from Dan!"

Jen saw Caroline's fingers tighten on the edge of the robe and she chuckled a little inside. But the package, when opened, had in it a towel from one of the girls who went to the Corners church.

It was the next night, Christmas Eve, that there came a frightened pounding on the kitchen door. The twins and Peter were in bed and Caroline and Jen were starting on the tree. This trimming of the tree, after so many treeless years, was a very precious time to Jen. She wished she might tell Caroline what it meant to her, but she could only touch the electric train with tender, glad fingers, slip Caroline's set of books in back of the red sled with a pleased, happy little smile. When the pounding came at the door, Jen turned

from the shining beauty of the little tree regretfully.

She came back to Caroline hurriedly.

"It's Kate Burgameyer's girl. Katie's time's come and she can't get the doctor—he's off up Norwich way and they can't reach him—she wants as I should come!"

"Shall—shall I come, too?" Caroline asked quickly.

Jen hesitated a long moment before she answered. Maybe—maybe *this* was what she had tried to tell Caroline. But her voice was natural enough.

"Mebbe you'd better," she said. "Poor Katie—kind of pitiful to have a baby after the father's dead! Don't know how she gets on—there's three already!"

They hurried into their things and down the snow-sprinkled road beside little Gretchen Burgameyer.

"Mebbe I'm doing wrong," thought Jen. "Mebbe I oughtn't to take her—mebbe it'll just make things worse!"

But, before she could think much, they were at the Burgameyer's little four-room house and she was ordering Caroline swiftly to do this and that

as if she were used to performing this service for neighbor women. Caroline had known death, but not birth. And she had never known real poverty—not poverty that meant bare floors in winter, no pictures, nothing but the barest necessities. Even the baby things that she took from the old broken dresser were coarse, used-before garments, but they were very clean and they were strangely small and sweet.

The hour was a confused time of pain and a sick horror that such agony must be endured. Jen saw that Caroline was greatly moved and she wondered more than once if she'd done right to bring her. Then, suddenly, Jen felt ill and shaken herself. Katie Burgameyer had come triumphantly up from the valley of the shadow, back to life in the bare little room and with four instead of three fatherless babies to feed and dress.

Jen sat down weakly.

"You—you'll have to wash and dress the baby, Caroline," she said. "My old heart's kind of gone back on me again! Everything's ready—the olive oil's on the table—"

So Caroline, in search of a career, washed and dressed the Burgameyer baby. Awkward, unbelievably awkward she was—she who handled

tennis racquets, horses, tractors with grace! Slow, too—and frightened. Jen watched her tenderly but, though her faintness passed, she sat still in the old unpainted chair and let Caroline finish her task unaided. She saw that Caroline's sure fingers trembled in their task more than once. And once, when she couldn't seem to get a small arm into a tiny sleeve, Jen saw, by the light of the kerosene lamp, something that glistened on Caroline's cheek. Her own lids smarted as Caroline came, carrying the baby to the bed.

Katie Burgameyer weakly took the baby into the shelter of her tired arm.

"He looks like Ed!" she said in a whisper. Then, turning her face suddenly away—"I wish Ed could have seen him!" But her eyes came back to the small, red face, came back lovingly, hopefully, bravely. Inside of two weeks Katie might be taking in washing again, maybe grumbling about the load she had to carry through life, but, nevertheless, she was beautiful now in her love and hope for this little new burden.

Then, as if prearranged by a divine hand, there were soft voices outside, then music—the young folks from the Corners church, singing Christmas carols.

*There's a song in the air,
There's a star in the sky;
There's a mother's deep prayer
And a baby's low cry!
And the star rains its fire—*

It was all just the same in the little Burgameyer house—bare and unlovely and poor. But there was Katie's face on the pillow; there was the light on the red tablecloth . . . and there was Caroline, straight and strong and lovely, standing by the bed, listening. There was something new and wonderful in Caroline's face. An old verse she had known in Sunday School came to Jen—

“And the glory of the Lord shone round about—”

The doctor came then, bringing Katie's sister from town, and Jen and Caroline were out again in the crisp night. They didn't talk much, though Jen did say,

“Guess I'll dress another chicken for the Burgameyers when I get back!”

And then,

“The singing came in kind of pretty, didn't it?”

Then they were at the road that led up to the Swale. Caroline stopped.

"I—I'm going to walk up to Martins'," she said honestly. "There's something I've got to tell Dan before Christmas!"

"All right," Jen said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and went on alone toward the house.

Inside the house she went first to look at the children, then she turned to the phone and called Dan Martin. There was no answer. Jen turned away, a little troubled. She had wanted Dan to meet Caroline halfway, and now, maybe, if he wasn't there, Caroline would find it hard to get the courage again.

She went to the window and looked out into the star-strewn, snow-dusted Christmas Eve. Then, down the road, she saw coming two figures—yes, it was Caroline's white sweater and tam, and Dan—big, good, Danny Martin! Jen's heart leaped—Dan must have been coming anyway! He *had* met her halfway! Then the two figures paused by the roadside . . . Jen could see plainly two dark arms against the white sweater, a dark head bent. She turned away, began quickly to string up tinsel and bright balls. But she felt uplifted, as if she had been vouchsafed a glimpse of infinity . . . straight, strong young Carolines, lovers

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of the soil, taking up the work of the Jen Cullitons . . . ever finding their Dan Martins to love and their old Martin farms to reclaim for the glory of planting time and harvest. Her big hand on the little red stocking of candy was unsteady, but she smiled contentedly. From very far away it seemed to her she could hear the echo of the carol:

*And the star rains its fire
While the Infinite sing,
For the manger of Bethlehem
Cradles a King!*

CHAPTER IX

THE BOY

IT was the day after his sister Caroline's wedding, and Ollie Crewe lay on the grass beneath the pound sweet tree. He felt lonely and lazy. To be lazy was almost a new feeling to him. But, through his strange inertia, he seemed to see everything with a sharp, new vision. Over night, the red new leaves of the maples had become soft green and the sweeping branches of the great elm outside his bedroom window made delicate green patterns against the May sky. The azalea bush out by the well—Aunt Jen said she and Uncle Steve had planted it the first spring after they were married—was a big pink flare. Ollie didn't remember ever thinking much about spring before. He wondered why he was thinking about it now.

Yesterday he had gone over to the field where Zeb had been plowing, and the smell of the turned earth had seemed new to him. It had made him remember one spring when he was a very little boy and his mother had let him dig a place with

a trowel out by the back fence in the city. He had put the seeds in himself. And one other spring, the first one here with Aunt Jen after his mother died, Zeb had let him drive the horses in from the field. It was a warm day and the horse's flanks had glistened with moisture. The horses had seemed very big and Ollie very powerful and important.

Down there in the orchard it was the same. The smell of the apple-blossoms made him think of things he had supposed quite forgotten. He puzzled about it with boy thoughts. Maybe, when you turned sod over, it let out old springs. Maybe the sap in the trees kept things in it and every year let it out in blossoms. Ollie flushed, all alone there—that was a silly idea!

It was like poetry and he'd always thought poetry foolish. What was the sense of poetry when you could play football or Indian massacre or knights conquering dragons? He chuckled a little as he remembered one time when he'd almost drowned trying to be the arm that held Excalibur out of the water. But only this week in school, Leo Gates, the schoolmaster, had read them a thing called: "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." It was about Lincoln, by

somebody called Walt Whitman. Leo Gates had looked different as he read it. It had hurt him, Ollie, so that once, in a terrible agony of shame, he had looked out of the window to hide his eyes. He had taken the book off Mr. Gates' desk at recess time and found the place. He couldn't get that about the thrush out of his head.

*"Sing on, there in the swamp—
O singer, bashful and tender!"*

He wished he hadn't read it again. It had seemed to hurt Leo Gates to read it, too. Queer! Peter, his little blind brother—he'd always been after him to read verses to him and he'd laughed at Peter and always read things in a silly sing-song. He wished now that he hadn't.

He wondered why you always felt restless in the spring. He couldn't stand it here much longer. He and Joe, maybe, would beat it off as soon as school was out.

He pulled the head off a violet and then jerked up on an elbow, a little resentfully. Joe, his twin, and Molly Parsons, were coming across the field. Ollie hated girls. But there was one thing about Molly—she never paid any attention

whether you liked her or not. They were laughing about something. They dropped down on the grass beside Ollie.

"Where's Peter?" Ollie asked.

"Oh, up in the hammock!"

A train rumbled along far down the slope. The sound intensified that restlessness in Ollie. He felt it like a physical ache.

"Look—it's Santa Fe!" Joe said lazily.

"'Tis not!" contradicted Molly. "It's San Francisco! San Francisco—Northern Pacific—Canadian Grand Central—Shawmut—Rio Grande—!"

Ollie heard her voice as a kind of chanting. She was lifted up on her knees in the grass, one hand shading her eyes. She was like a boy with her short hair and khaki bloomers. Even she seemed different to Ollie. He'd always thought her a bother, but now it seemed kind of nice to have her there. He wished she would go on with her singing from the box cars.

"Golly!" he raised himself up further, jerked backward, across the green grass till his back was against the pound sweet tree. "Golly! I'm going to go to all of those places one of these days!"

"How?" asked Molly. "In an aeroplane?"

"Uh-uh! Walk—bum my way! You'd get all kinds of adventures. Don't tell, but maybe Joe 'n' I'll beat it out soon as school is over!"

They had talked of it, vaguely. Ollie felt a surprise at himself for being suddenly sure of it.

"Why, Ollie Crewe! You will not! You wouldn't dare!"

"I would so! I hate school—Aunt Jen thinks we'll go off to college! Not me! I'm going to hop a freight and get off to Santa Fe—honest—soon's school's out!"

"You wouldn't be anything but a tramp!"

"Well—maybe! Maybe I'd be like a Captain Kidd or Daniel Boone or somebody. There's still treasures around—lots down in Mexico or South America!"

"Treasures! *Silly!*" scoffed Molly.

Molly's dark, thin face, with its eyes a little shy above the unafraid mouth and eager lifted chin, came between Ollie and the blue above apple-blossom pink. He didn't want to talk to her, but he found himself saying things, queer things that made him uncomfortable to know were inside him.

"Well, there are! *You're* a silly! Wait till I go—I'll send you home a—a—"

Molly laughed clearly. When she laughed, she put her head back. Her throat looked very white beneath the tan of her face.

"Yes—a *what?* I'd rather stay home and go to college and play football if I were you! Why, what do you want to *be?*"

"Be? *Be?* I don't want to be anything—just myself! Why in the dickens do you have to *be* something?"

"Well, why in the dickens shouldn't you? Everybody does!"

"Yes—I know it, but I won't!" Inside, Ollie felt his heart pounding like it used to nights when he was afraid of the dark, but he kept on: "I don't know why you have to be like everybody else! You be a doctor and you have to fuss over other folks' pains from morning till night—or, if you're a lawyer, you have to fight for folks you know are crooks—or, if you work in a store or a factory, somebody's always bossing you! I just want to be myself—not be under anybody's thumb! If I went to college, I'd do some of those things and I'd hate it!"

Ollie saw Joe's slow grin—Molly's suddenly serious, dark little face. He wished Joe would go up to the house.

"That doesn't sound sensible," Molly said slowly. "But I don't just know why! I know what you mean—that feeling! When it's spring I feel like that, too, and I don't even want to help do the dishes or go down after rhubarb, or anything. But I feel different in the fall! Then I want to be a—a singer—or something like that, and I'd just as soon work terribly hard to get to be it!"

Molly was sitting now, also, with her back to a tree, her brown arms about her knees. She didn't look like a boy, now.

Up through the trees, Ollie saw his Aunt Jen coming. She had on a blue gingham dress, turned in at the neck as a man turns in a shirt. Aunt Jen looked different to him, too. He had always thought her homely—kind and good enough—but too big—*homely*, that was the word that had always been in his mind about her. He shut his eyes against her and then flushed a little and looked sharply at Joe to see if Joe had seen him do it. Aunt Jen looked beautiful—yes, *beautiful* was the surprising word that came into his mind. Her big figure in its clean blue came along so easily under the apple trees. Ollie had always thought she combed her sandy hair queerly, but

it didn't seem so now. It would have looked strange, curled and fluffed out. Ollie thought of a picture in a book of myths at school. It was of a Saxon king. Aunt Jen looked like that king. Then he saw she had a letter in her hand.

When she came nearer, he saw that her kind, calm blue eyes were troubled.

"Boys!" she said abruptly, "I've just had a letter from your father!"

Ollie scowled a little. His father never wrote much, just sent a little money now and then. Ollie kept away from thoughts about his father. In some way he connected his father with blame for his mother's dying. No reason—real reason—only he just did. Maybe it was things he'd heard his aunts saying afterward, how he'd "soon be comforted," and "he'd ought not to have wanted so many children, with her so frail and all!" Aunt Jen ignored Molly. She always treated her like one of the family, anyway.

"He wants one of you to come live with him, soon as school is out! I don't deny it kind of knocks me all in a heap—I've got used to you around and you're a big help, too—but he's lonesome and I guess it's no more than right for one of you to go be with him for a spell!"

Her voice was brusque and deep as always, but Ollie thought suddenly of his mother. After one of them had been naughty, her voice had used to be hurt like that. He hadn't thought much before as to whether Aunt Jen liked them or not. He knew now that she did, a lot.

"I don't want to be the one to say which'll go," he heard her saying. "It'll have to be one of you, of course—he couldn't manage about Peter. I guess you boys'll have to decide between you!"

Ollie felt Jen's shrewd blue eyes upon him. He didn't want to look at her, but he had to.

"She wants *me* to stay here!" he thought, with queer, disturbing certainty.

Then he saw Aunt Jen going back up through the orchard. Her shoulders looked so broad and strong. Once, when he'd fallen out of a tree, she had taken him in her arms as if he were little. He'd been eleven. He remembered the sure strength of her, the strange comfort of putting his cheek against her. He flushed at remembering it. Then he saw Joe's eyes, sullen, defiant.

"I shan't go back!" Joe said.

Molly looked startled.

"I should think you'd want to live with your father!" she said.

Both boys were silent. Molly grew red under the tan. Ollie wanted to tell her things, about his mother—about how his father had always let them alone—but the words seemed pushed back into him. Molly scrambled to her feet.

“I’ve got to go help with supper!” she said. The boys sat still and let her go. Ollie watched her white middy till she was far across the spring-green fields. Once an end of red tie blew across her shoulder.

That night Ollie lay awake a long time. The moonlight made a path across the floor to the bed; the elm branches traced a quivering design across that path. Joe kept his back turned. He was asleep; but Ollie could not sleep. He thought about his father. He was thin and sober. Ollie remembered once when he had taken them to the zoo. They’d gone about so silently. When his mother went, they would get so excited about the baby deer and the pelicans. Ollie couldn’t remember his father ever talking to them. He thought about Aunt Jen. She was a queer woman—but beautiful—yes (sleep hovered)—yes, she was very beautiful! He wished Molly would sing some more things off cars—it sounded like magic, like the passwords they fixed up for getting into

caves. Suddenly he sat up with a wide-awake jerk. He shook Joe.

"Joe!" he said.

"Huh?" said Joe, quite wide awake. That almost frightened Ollie, to know Joe had been lying there wide awake; it was almost as if Joe had been listening to his thoughts.

"Listen—let's go away now, shall we? We'll go down by the water tank and hitch a freight when it stops to get water! I shan't go back to the city—get stuck in an office! I'm going to get out and see the world! I don't want to be bossed by anybody!"

"Now—to-night?" Joe whispered.

"Next week—will you?"

"Sure!"

Ollie lay down again. There seemed no more to say. He wondered why he hadn't said 'now—to-night.' Well, it was Peter's birthday next Sunday. Peter always counted a lot on birthdays. After a long time he went to sleep.

Ollie couldn't look at Jen in the next days. But every time a train went rumbling past, he felt that queer inner rumbling, as if he were being drawn along on the train and couldn't help himself. Once he dreamed that, and found himself

wanting to drop off the train and wait for his father, running along behind. But he didn't dare let go. His father, in the dream, though, looked big and powerful, like Aunt Jen.

Out in a hole in an apple tree, Ollie had a rabbit's foot and a stone that was round as a compass circle. The stone had a hole worn in the middle of it. There was a key there, a strange brass key that Zeb had turned up in plowing. There were three porcupine quills in a little box that had been used to hold pencil leads. A big green glassie that was as clear as lake water. A willow whistle, with his name scratched on it with a pin. One day Ollie went out to the apple tree and put all the things inside a handkerchief and stuffed them into his pocket.

On Friday he asked Professor Gates if he could borrow that book for over Sunday. "I'll write and have Molly take it back!" he thought. Professor Gates looked over his glasses, with puzzled curiosity, at Ollie.

"Well," he hesitated, "that seems a little mature for you, Ollie! Why did you want it?"

"Oh," Ollie felt very embarrassed. "Never mind—I just kind of thought I'd look over that poem you read us!" He turned away abruptly,

as if poems were of really small matter to him, but Leo Gates called him back.

"Here, take it!" he said. "Only don't try to understand it all!"

Ollie put it between his other books so the boys wouldn't notice it.

There had come another letter from his father.

"He thinks he'll come up here in about two weeks or so and one of you can go along back with him!" Jen said. "You haven't decided which one's going, have you?" She looked from one to the other sharply.

Ollie shook his head and went at once out on the back porch, where he began to whistle. His Aunt Jen had been crying, and the knowledge disturbed him, made him feel guilty; about what he did not know. They had decided now on Sunday, Sunday night. There was a fast freight went through at eleven. It always stopped at the water tank. Ollie seemed to swell inside just thinking about it. The whole world to see—no one to hold him back! Maybe they would get on a steamer after a while—a cattle-boat, maybe, and go across. You couldn't grow to be much of anybody here, or in the city.

Peter came out and sat down on the top step;

his chin in his palms in a lonely little gesture peculiar to him, he stared down toward the orchard as if he were seeing it. Ollie felt angry at Peter, just for sitting there like that, and he went down the steps and away from him toward the barn. But, at the barn door, he looked back and there was Peter, sitting there in just the same attitude, his wistful mouth drooping, his curly mop of dark hair making him look like a picture out of a story-book.

"He hasn't any business looking like that!" Ollie thought and then went back up to the house, sat down on the step below Peter.

"I got you a pail of pollywogs!" he said. Peter's face grew boyish, eager, happy. But Ollie, if he hadn't been fifteen, would have thrown himself on the grass and cried.

Then it was Sunday—all gold and blue. Ollie woke to the sound of the orioles. He shut his eyes and tried to sleep again. But he tingled all over. *This was the day!* To-night they were going — Mexico — ranches — mountains — cattle-boats—and *no one to boss!* It seemed to Ollie that he could not bear it another day unless he could be his own master—well, he wouldn't have to! When he dressed for Sunday School, he

grinned at himself in the glass. Next Sunday he'd be, maybe, a thousand miles away.

When he went downstairs, Aunt Jen was standing by the table in her black silk. "That isn't the kind of dress she ought to wear!" he thought sharply. "She looks better in her blue everyday clothes—or even in overalls!" He did not know how big that thought was. Aunt Jen spoke slowly.

"I've been looking at this book you brought along from school," she said. "Your Grandpa knew this Walt Whitman, did you know that?"

Ollie found a queer lump going up and down in his throat.

"He was a nurse in a hospital where your Grandpa was sick in war days. He was always saying poetry—or your Grandpa used to say it was poetry! We used to laugh at him. It didn't have any rhyme or anything. But I been looking this over—and I guess Grandpa was right. It does have something about it—don't it? Toward the last your Grandpa was kind of childish, and he told about war days over and over, and he seemed to talk a lot about this Walt Whitman. There's one line he used to say—I can remember it yet—'*I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along the*

shores of the Great Lakes, and all over the prairies—' We'd laugh at it, but it *did* always sound kind of grand to me—like the Gettysburg speech we had to learn in school—"

Ollie found his hand going out to touch his Aunt Jen, then it dropped again to his side. He thought again of the Saxon king. When Aunt Jen said that line by Walt Whitman, she'd looked like that again. He had never seen his Aunt Jen reading in all the four years he had been there. Seemed queer she'd know how to say a thing like that. He thought, not of the Gettysburg speech, but of Abraham Lincoln, as he looked at her.

"Well, shall we get along to church?" was all he said.

"Yes, I guess it's time. Joe ready?"

In the afternoon, Ollie took Peter up on the hill after mountain laurel. Joe didn't want to go, and Ollie felt somehow glad.

"Kind of thought I'd go down see Tub Pierce," Joe said. Ollie heard a note in Joe's voice that frightened him. Was Joe backing out?

He took the book from the school along. They had to go slowly on account of Peter. Ollie kept Peter's hand tight in his. When they came to the little creek, he said,

"Hang on, old timer—I'll carry you over!"

Peter wasn't very heavy, he thought. He kept thinking about it all the way up across the hillside. He tried to push the thought away, but it stuck, like a fly in the berry patch. Then they came to the woods.

"Let's lie down and rest awhile!" Peter's voice was tired.

"Sure!" said Ollie. They stretched out in a spot that was sunny. Peter loved the sun. He lay very still and let it beat down on his face and thin little body. He didn't look eleven. Ollie lay beside him. The clouds went ballooning past like great ships. It was very quiet there—just the birds. Far down below were the roofs of the town. Ollie wished he could sleep there awhile. When Peter had been little, he used to play a game with him—the magic carpet game. He wanted to play it now. He swallowed hard, slid a little nearer in the grass so that his elbow touched Peter.

"Here we go a-sailing!" he said suddenly. Peter lay very still, but about his mouth trembled a small, warm smile. "All on? Look, there's the Methodist steeple! See the creek? Gosh, aren't the willows pretty, all yellow-green like that?"

There's a bluebird! Wow—we almost bumped a cloud! Hang on—we're terrible high! See the hill down there! That's the laurel that's so pink—and there's the white birches! See them bend under the wind! Don't it feel great to have the wind in your face? Isn't it warm? Look how the creek twists around down on the flats! There's Aunt Jen's—see the barn? Here comes a flock of birds! Bet they're from the south—let's be the leader! Here we go—hang on, Peter, hang on! Feel that wind!"

Peter was sitting up now, cross-legged, his face uplifted to the blue sky. There was a look in his face as if he really were leading a thousand birds across the blue, against the warm wind. Ollie pulled his elbow away so it did not touch Peter. He couldn't bear it to feel like this—so tight inside.

"Steady, now—she's coming down! Gentle, old boy! Right there in front of the birches! Steady! There!" He scrambled to his feet. You would suddenly have known them to be brothers. "Come on, let's get some laurel! A bushel of it! It's better on up. Here—now we're 'most up the mountain! Gee, that's a deep gully! You sit here on this log—whistle so I can find

the place all right. I'll bring the laurel here!"

He began whistling himself, unsteadily, striding off through the trees. He paused presently—faint, but clear, came Peter's whistle. Ollie threw back his head suddenly, went back.

"Most forgot!" he said. "Brought something along to read. Don't know—maybe you won't understand it—I'll read it anyhow! It's about Lincoln, when he died—his friend wrote it—"

He read it, in a voice which grew curiously like Leo Gates' in that self-forgetful moment before his class.

*"When Lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western
sky in the night—"*

He was not the Ollie Crewe who put toads in the teacher's desk, not the Ollie Crewe who was going to run off to-night. He knew it as he read and it disturbed him, bewildered him, crept into his voice like a minor groping chant. He became aware of tears running down Peter's blind face. Something stung down his own face and he closed the book abruptly.

"Now sit right still, old scout! I'll be back with the laurel in a jiffy!"

He was off again. A few rods away he paused. There it was, clear and sweet, that childish whistle! Ollie went on. Something seemed to pull him back and he tried to jerk away from it, to run. To-night, at eleven, down by the water tank! There was laurel, great sweet pink masses of it. He scrambled after it, began to break it off. Gee, it was nice out in the woods this time of year. Peter's whistle came. Ollie thought of the thrush—"*Sing on, there in the swamp!—O singer, bashful and tender!*" He thrust on toward a brighter burst of fragrant pinkness. His arms were full, but he leaned against a tree for long moments, staring down through the woods to the valley below. Aunt Jen's house—the red barn—they looked so beautiful to-day. And yet, they were just a regular farm like the rest! He lifted his head—where was the whistle? He turned swiftly, whistled loudly, waited for an answer. None came. He strode through the woods; he began to call in a sudden panic of fear.

"Peter—oh, Peter!" He still clung to the laurel as he ran. Peter did not answer. Ollie came to the log—looked this way and that. Peter was gone. He dropped the laurel.

"Peter! *Peter!*" he called at the top of his

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voice. A bird sang loudly, clearly, sweetly, somewhere back in the wood. "*Sing on—oh, singer bashful and tender!*" He ran this way and that.

"*Peter! Peter! Answer me! Peter!*"

Peter did not answer. Ollie ran to the edge of the gully, peered down the bank. And far down below, Peter's blue blouse made color against the brown of last year's leaves. Ollie slid, fell, down the steep slope. He tore his shirt, dug his elbow on a rock. Peter lay, caught up by a crooked birch tree, very still, face down in the leaves. Ollie snatched him up.

"Peter! Peter!" But Peter did not speak.

Ollie looked up the banks. How would he ever get him up there? Down. That was better—the creek was shallow—it would take him out down by Molly Parsons'. He went as carefully as he could down to the water, walked along the edge, finally in the water itself. Peter lay, limp, in his arms.

"Good heavens!" Ollie thought, with his throat drawn tight as in a knot—"I almost went away and left him!"

Some new knowledge stirred and burned in him. Something called "responsibility" entered into him. Peter stirred in his arms, became

heavy. He'd have to go to the city, that's what he'd have to do—go into an office, maybe, learn to make a living right away—then he'd be able to take care of Peter better! His father was lonesome—he'd seen the letter—"I'm a lonely man, Jen!" He suddenly understood his father, and was ashamed. He came, white with fatigue, up through the orchard at last. Jen saw him coming, hurried to meet him. She held out her arms for Peter, but he kept on, carried Peter into the house and put him gently on the couch. He dropped to the floor beside him, his head tiredly down beside Peter's. He heard Jen calling the doctor.

Afterward, out on the porch, Joe said,

"You going to wear your best suit to-night?"

"Oh, that's all off!" Ollie heard himself saying in a strange new tongue, as if it were a small matter, of no account. Joe stared at him. Joe looked very young to him.

When his father came down the next Sunday, they walked down in the orchard together. He was as tall as his father and felt as old.

"I'm glad *you're* going back with me for a year!" John Crewe said presently, a little embarrassed. "I'd hoped it would be you—Joe'll take

better to a professional job. But I had a notion you belonged here!"

Ollie stared at his father bewilderedly. John Crewe smiled quietly.

"It's what I've always wanted—to get on a farm," he said. "Your Aunt Jen's getting on some in years . . . I thought maybe she'd let me buy a share in the place—or work it on shares. I guess she's going to let me buy a share. But I want one of you boys here with me! One that the land means something to! There's another year on my contract, but . . . then . . ."

He put his hand out to a branch of an apple tree as if to a friend.

"I thought I'd like you there with me . . . a year . . . in *her* house . . . to read her books with me—to—to—" he paused, a look of such deep trouble in his eyes that Ollie turned away from it. But his father spoke again of the farm.

"There's something about land—you're your own master! You can make things grow and each year it's all new and beautiful!"

"*Your own master*"—the words touched some spring in Ollie's mind. He looked about him quickly. Why, it was true! You would be your own master! You'd be like a—a king! That was,

maybe, what gave Aunt Jen that look. It was the only place, really, where you *could* be your own master! A feeling of power lifted Ollie's head. The petals fell about him—this would be all red with apples in a few short months!

Ollie laughed suddenly aloud. He had wanted to go to Mexico!

Just before they left, John Crewe said,

"Well, thanks for letting me have the boy, Jen!"

Ollie saw his Aunt Jen's smile, a little sad, but beautiful.

"Guess he isn't a boy any longer, John!" she said.

At Parsons', Ollie put out a hand suddenly.

"Stop here, Dad!" he said. Molly was out by the well. He went straight to her, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. It was filled.

"I wish you'd give this to Peter for me, will you?" he demanded. "I forgot it! It—it's *treasures!*" he said, a little defiantly.

Molly took the things. Her brown fingers touched his and she looked up at him quickly, shyly. He heard himself saying something quite unintended.

"You write, will you, Molly?" he said. "I'll write back!"

CHAPTER X

THE MISTRESS OF THE BEES

IT seemed only a few tranquil weeks between the time Ollie Crewe went off to the city and to-day, when Ollie was back, with his father, running the Culliton place with a love and understanding as deep as Jen's own. They'd been good friends, she and her nephew, Ollie—always good friends. Maybe because Jen had let him work things out his own way. She'd never been one to boss or pry.

She did not mean to pry this time. She had come downstairs with the quilting frames and somehow they had seemed very heavy and she had stood a moment, too tired to go on.

"I'll call Ollie," she thought, "and get him to take them out."

But she didn't call him. She leaned the frames against a chair and sat down a little abruptly. She knew she shouldn't have tried to carry the frames. It was very still in the house. She could even hear the crackling of the wood fire in the

kitchen stove. It was with a little start that she looked out through the kitchen doorway and saw that the kitchen was not empty. Beside the stove stood Molly Parsons. At the back window stood Ollie. There was a hurt in the bend of his shoulders that found an answering pain in Jen's heart. Oliver Crewe meant a good deal to Jen. He was all Crewe, and yet there was a quiet strength about him that was a very match for the strength that seemed to lie eternally in that great, awkward, beautiful figure there beside the quilting frames. So Jen loved Ollie.

Neither of the two was aware of her. Oliver's hands were in his pockets, his eyes upon the September-golden hills.

"Well," came his voice to Jen through the stillness, "I suppose there's no more use talking about it. We seem to have finished."

Jen could see something like fright come into Molly Parsons' eyes. From a graceful, hoydenish child who grew still in the midst of a game of "Catch a thief" to listen to a lark's song, had come this woman, beautiful beyond even Oliver's boyish dreams of her, with a lark's song come to live in her slim, white throat.

"Yes," she said slowly, "we seem to have fin-

ished, Ollie. It—it hurts to finish things with you—we've been friends so long!"

"*Friends?*"

"Don't, Ollie! I wish I could make you see!"

"I do see!"

"No, you don't! You don't see how I *have* to sing, whether I want to or not. You think if I loved you enough I wouldn't care about the singing! You think that, don't you, Ollie? It—it hasn't anything to do with love!"

"You've made that clear. Let's not talk about it any more, Molly! There's a limit to what a man can bear! You'll stay for the quilting, won't you? Aunt Jen's been counting on you!"

"Yes—of course, Oliver! Ollie—I—I—"

He turned and Jen's heart grew tight at the hope springing into his dark eyes. But Molly did not go on.

"Yes?" he said evenly.

"Oh, nothing—I suppose—only, I hate to cut things off, as if they'd never been. I—I feel like a little girl—going out into the dark—"

Into his lean face the feeling came flooding.

"Molly! Oh, *Molly!*"

She made a little protesting gesture with her hands.

"Don't, Ollie! I *have* to go, even if it is dark!"

He turned again to the window and did not answer. Molly stood, hesitant, as if she wanted to go to him, but could not. She turned, instead, and came toward the other room.

"Aunt Jen!" she called.

Every one called Jen "Aunt Jen" since the Crewe children had lived with her. She had risen, drawn the frames again into her arms as if she had just come downstairs with them. A little red stung her cheek bones, for she was not used to deceptions. She had on a blue gingham, as she always did nowadays, and a black and white percale apron tied round her waist. She did not shrink with the years, Jen; she was as tall, as powerful as ever.

"Where's Oliver? Thought we'd set the frames up outside. It's going to be plenty warm and we won't get many more days like this!"

"He's in the kitchen," Molly said gravely, but she did not go after him. "Let me take the things out!"

She took the frames in her strong young arms and got them through the doorway. Jen, watching her, saw her look with unaccustomed wistful-

ness back toward the old house. But she did not go out to her. She turned, instead, toward the kitchen. Oliver sat at the kitchen table, his head down on his arms, all his strength gone out of him. Jen went to him, put a big hand, with unbelievable gentleness, on his shoulder.

"What is it, Ollie?" she asked.

He did not answer.

"Is it Molly?"

He did not speak, but he reached up and drew her hand under his face. Jen felt it grow hot with tears.

"There, son—it'll come out all right!" she said tenderly.

"It's all over," he said dully.

He jumped to his feet suddenly, pulled his arm in an angry, boyish gesture across his eyes.

"Dandy day for the quilting!" he said.

"Yes," Jen agreed, but her voice was troubled.

They put the frames up then and Molly and Oliver laughed and joked till Jen thought she must have dreamed that moment in the kitchen. But young folks were different nowadays. Jen wished she could talk to Molly—but she'd never been able to, of late years. Molly held you off. She'd put on so much sophistication since she'd

been off studying. But Jen did try to say something.

"Always took a sight of comfort in the farm on a day like this!" she said, as she spread out the rolls of cotton. "The peace of it kind of gets right into your bones this weather!"

"Yes, it's lovely," Molly said, not looking up. "But it must be lonely sometimes—so far from folks—and things . . ."

"I've never found it so!" Jen said dryly. "Depends on how busy you keep, mebbe. I've always had to hustle! Kind of makes me mad, anyhow, to hear folks talk like that! You, especially, Molly Parsons, born and brought up in these hills! Guess you wasn't a very lonesome young 'un, was you?"

"No. But that was different! I—I hadn't known there was any other world!"

"*Other world*—h'mph! It's all the same world, child! Same folks here as anywhere! Looks to me as if the only folks that'd be lonesome here are those with nothing to 'em but sawdust! If you've got anything to *you*, the hills and the seasons and the work'll satisfy. If you haven't, mebbe you'd have to have electric lights and shows and cards and dancing continuous!

I've met a sight of city folks up at my girl Margaret's, and while some of 'em's right nice, seems to me most of 'em are struggling and grasping and haven't any idea what they're reaching for! They're hunting after happiness and content, that's what! Don't know as I've seen a single face up there like, say, your mother's—or Mis' Price's—or John Simmons'! And you can't say they're here because they haven't brains to go elsewhere! They've done well, all of 'em! And they're about as content as folks go in this world!"

"Yes—but—" Molly began hesitantly.

"But what?"

"But you might have real work out there, too!"

"True enough. But I'd want to make sure it was terrible real before I gave up my place here. The land gets to be part of you, and there aren't so many city flats you can say that about!"

Molly stood staring down through the orchard a long moment, her eyes wistful. But she pulled herself back with a little jerk.

"Well, I'll have to run home to dinner, Aunt Jen! I'll come back with Mother. Don't work too hard!"

"H'mph!" Jen said scornfully.

She went into the house, then into the pantry and looked over the things spread out on the shelf. Cakes—ham—pickles—pumpkin pie—

"Guess I'd better have another jar of raspberry jell up!" she said aloud. "And mebbe I'll call Allie and have her bring some of her chili sauce—she makes such good, and it'll go fine with the beans."

Her own was just as good, but Allie liked to be asked.

When Oliver came in to wash up for dinner, Jen said, quite abruptly,

"What is it, Ollie—her singing?"

Oliver grew dully crimson.

"I see 'tis," Jen answered for him. "Well, she'll see one of these days! If I thought she was really great, I wouldn't say a word—they's some folks seems meant to serve the world—but Molly's not one of them!"

"She's made up her mind," Ollie said. "She thinks life would be—narrow—here— but it's more than that, Aunt Jen! Her singing's some kind of a force, driving her on! But let's not talk about it, Aunt Jen—let's not!"

"All right," Jen said. "But I can remember Molly Parsons singing to her dolls out under that

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maple tree there, and I hate to see her making a fool of herself!"

"Did you want me to go down after Grandma Price right after dinner?" he asked, and Jen knew she could say no more to him.

They began to come soon—Mrs. Laraway, old Mrs. Frazier, Mrs. Burgameyer, Mrs. Price, Allie Parsons and Molly—all the neighbors.

"Good!" said Allie. "Glad you got things outdoors, Jen! Won't have many more good, warm afternoons like this! Say, I forgot my shears, Jen! You got an extra pair?"

"My, that's a pretty pattern you got, Jen, for setting the blocks together with! It's hard to get that good old-fashioned pink nowadays. Mebbe it's just because I'm so old-fashioned myself, but seems to me there's nothing like pink calico for comforters!"

"Jeanne sent me a silk comforter last Christmas!" Mrs. Laraway put in, a little scornfully. "I keep it on the spare bed so's she'll see it when she's home, but I stick to the old Rising Sun and the Maple Leaf for real comfort!"

Grandma Price had come now.

"Never get used to cars as long as I live!" she said, breathlessly. "My land—I'm glad to set!

Ollie's an awful reckless driver, Jen—you ought to give him a talking to!"

"Oliver's a man now," Jen said. "Can't talk to him any more!"

"Well, I don't know but what he is! Sakes—don't seem possible! Why, it wasn't but yesterday that Joe and him was such little peelers they upset the whole neighborhood!"

Jen was passing scissors and thread.

"Makes you know you're getting on in years!" she said.

"Well, you bear your years well, Jen," Mrs. Frazier said comfortably.

Jen gave a little inward start. She had made that remark almost unconsciously. It was a stock remark. It did not apply to herself. She looked about at the pleasant, friendly faces, and for the first time, it came to her that they were not the busy, bustling, middle-aged friends of the years past—they were elderly women, all a little tired. The discovery made her a little tired, too, suddenly, and she sat down rather abruptly at the end of the frames. She looked up to see Molly, strong and slender and beautiful, threading a needle for Grandma Price. A swift feeling of resentment seemed to shake Jen.

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Why, they were all getting old! Was she, too? Her hair was gray and, of course, she couldn't do the work she'd used to turn out—but she wasn't *old*! She'd never felt it, not since that time when she'd most sold the farm. She'd never thought she looked it to the rest! But maybe she did. And yet, she felt, almost fiercely, that there was a difference. She'd never thought of it before, but she did now. All these friends were glad to sit here and gossip and quilt, glad and content. They were satisfied to live in the past. But she was not. She liked to feel that the reins of the farm were still in her big hands, as they were. She still liked to drive into town and turn a good bargain. She was still, as she always had been, the head of the Culliton farm.

But, as she looked about at all the comfortable faces, a feeling of wistfulness passed over her. Good, happy women, all of them—who'd done their part and were resting now! Somehow she had never thought of there being a time when she would rest, really rest; and yet, this fall, she'd been pretty tired, too! Then she was pulled out of her thoughts into their reminiscences.

"Ed's cousin, Bart, 's pretty low!" Allie said, taking a pin out of her mouth. "He's going the

same way Ed's mother did—the identical same way!"

"You put in a couple bad years with Ed's mother, didn't you?" Cora Frazier reminded Allie.

"I thought they were bad at the time—they probably weren't. But I was just married and wanting a home of my own and she was kind of overbearing! Do you mind the night she died, Jen? I was so nervous I got you to come over and stay all night. Remember about the bees? She was a great hand for the bees—she was kind of superstitious about them and when she knew she was going she told me to be sure and go out and knock on the hive and tell 'em they had a new mistress, to keep on making sweet honey, and not to go away! And it was so kind of still and frightening there that I felt like I had to do it! You remember how she made you do things! Or she did me, anyway! I mind how you held the lantern, Jen—and I knocked—my hands was so cold they shook! Funny, the things folks used to do, ain't it?"

"Yes, I mind that night, Allie. I remember I thought the bees ought to be glad of getting you for a mistress after Ed's mother! Sorry to hear

about Bart—he's always had bad luck, seems to me!"

"Yes, he wanted to go off to school and couldn't get away, and then he had that year in the aviation during the war and wanted to go in for that, but couldn't on account of that hip trouble that come on! Well, it's apt to happen that way! Me—I thought I never could stand it if I couldn't be a milliner!"

Mrs. Laraway laughed her fat, comfortable laugh.

"Well, when I was a girl some Salvation Army folks came to town and held tent meetings, and I thought if I couldn't be a Salvation Army lassie with a bow under my chin, I'd die!"

"I wanted to be a missionary," Jen said with her dry humor. "I guess it was that old song, 'From Greenland's icy mountains, From India's coral strand,' that done it! I was always fond of coral!"

"Well," Allie said, more soberly, "guess you got your wish, Jen!"

Grandma Price nodded her head in slow, authoritative confirmation.

"What?" Jen said, startled.

"Well, you've done a good lot of missionary

work, seems to me! I could tell a few things!"

Jen flushed. "Well, don't," she said dryly.

"Remember Reverend Marrow? Guess you did a little mission'ry work for him, Jen! Made his going easy for him, anyhow!"

"And those four children to bring up—that's been a chore!"

"Oh, that's been fun!" Jen said. "And they've been a lot of help to me—besides comfort!"

"Yes, but they weren't when you took 'em! And look at Peter, what a fine big boy he's got to be! No sulking and asking you to pity him! Guess everybody loves Peter Crewe! And you've put in some of the best teachers we ever had up this way these years you've been on the school board! The folks around here were worse'n heathen when it came to picking out a teacher for their young 'uns! Yes, you've certainly done your share there, Jen!"

"Oh, fiddlesticks!" Jen said impatiently.

"I had some pretty tough years when the children were all little," said Katie Burgameyer, flushing. "Mis' Culliton saw to it that they all had shoes and decent clothes for school—and she never went bragging of it all round the county, either!" Katie gave a quick, loyal smile at Jen.

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"Well, I heard something, too—straight from Nate's wife—about how Jen had a chance to put Nate to the wall when he couldn't meet payments on his farm and Jen might well have done it, too, for spite, after the way he acted about the school board—but she even let the interest go for a couple of years till he got on his feet! Nate's wife told me herself! Yes, all in all, I'd say you'd done some pretty good mission'ry work right on this road, Jen!"

"Good land, Faith Laraway! What you trying to do? Make a fool of me in my old age? Shame on you! . . . Molly, why don't you sing something for us? Seems as if it would sound good out here in the open! Sing something old, will you? We aren't much up on music up here, but some of the old things sound good to us! We'll quilt right along if you don't mind!"

Molly Parsons flushed. But she was unafraid, and she saw Jen's embarrassment, so she stood up in the shade of the big maple and sang to them.

"Way Down Upon the Swanee River" and then "Old Black Joe" and "Darling Nellie Gray" she gave them.

"Used to sing them in singing school!" Grand-

ma Price put in once with a satisfied nodding of her head. "Sing 'Annie Laurie'!"

So Molly sang "Annie Laurie" and "Seeing Nellie Home" and "Loch Lomond." And the busy, gray-haired women about the quilting frame paused in their work, their eyes upon some far-away time, as they listened to the clear sweet voice of Allie Parsons' girl.

"Guess you're getting tired," Jen said at last, gently. "But I wish you'd sing 'Sweet and Low,' Molly. Always thought a lot of that song!"

*"Sweet and low,
Sweet and low—
Wind of the western sea!"*

Very tender and beautiful and sad the young voice was, and Jen thought of the little girl singing to her dolls out under this very tree. When Molly finished, it was very still in the big yard, as if, somehow, they all wished to prolong the sweetness of the moment. Far off the crickets made pleasant crural monotony in the fields. The elms were yellow against the sky and a sudden wind sent a swirl of leaves like golden magic up to the blue. Faith Laraway pulled a handker-

chief from her pocket and openly wiped her eyes. Allie's mouth twitched as if tears were close. Jen felt suddenly that she couldn't bear the moment longer.

"Thanks, Molly," she said. "That was powerful sweet. We won't forget it for a good long spell, I'm thinking, will we, girls? You got that piece done, Faith? Guess we can roll it up, then, and get in to the table. It'll be dark before we know it!"

Then they were in the house, making sure everything was in their bags, coming, neighbor-wise, out into the kitchen to hold their hands above the fire that made the swift, crisp shadows warm.

"My, a fire feels good—especially at my age!" Allie Parsons said.

"H'mph!" scoffed Jen.

They came to the table. Caroline had come down from her home to help out, and she and Molly passed things. They seemed very young and childish, even to themselves. For there was wisdom about Jen's table that night, the wisdom of women who have borne children, whose children have borne children—the wisdom of women who have toiled through two score or more years

to wrest a living from the land—the wisdom of women who live in the country, love it, find peace in it, and do not hanker to live elsewhere. And of them all, Jen Culliton was the wisest. As she sat at the head of her table and made them all at home, there was something stupendous about her, some evidence of a grip on life that few possess, some dignity that was hers by virtue of her contact with earth, with the growing and selling of food.

“Have some more beans, Faith!” she said once. “This is Allie’s chili sauce and it goes real good with them!”

Then, a little later:

“Mrs. Burgameyer, you’ll have some more ham, won’t you? You didn’t tell me how your boy was. Is he getting over his lameness all right? Molly, make some more tea, will you? Nothing like a fresh cup of tea for talking things over on, is there, girls? Cora, I haven’t heard how your mother was? Some one said she was ailing again!”

“No, she’s a little better to-day, Jen. She had a bad spell while we was picking the early apples—I was about tuckered out between cooking for pickers and taking care of her! Goodness knows,

I'm not complaining, though—Ma's done lots for me all my life!"

"Yes, she's a good woman—the salt of the earth!" Jen said.

Molly Parsons, in the doorway with the tea, felt a sudden stinging mist before her eyes. *There was such kindness in this house!* It was like a strange revelation to Allie Parsons' daughter. It was as if she had been following a vision for years, and now, almost up to it, it had grown suddenly small and gray and unworthy. But another took its place. A vision of a good woman, going her simple way, doing good to others with no ostentation, bringing fruitfulness out of the soil, doing her share in making the community better, bringing up children like Ollie and Joe and Caroline and Peter—a great woman, greater than she, Molly, would ever have been, going about seeking fame!

Jen smiled up at her gently as she set the tea down, not seeing what was in her heart, but touched, nevertheless, by the shining of the young face.

After a little, they all went out into the crispness of the autumn night.

"It's been a good afternoon, Jen," Faith Lara-

way said. "Don't know when I've enjoyed a day so!"

"Me, either!" Cora Frazier said softly, as she gathered up her bag. "Seems a long time since we girls have got together like this! Wish we could do it oftener—I always feel good after!"

"Good night!—Good night, Cora! Thanks, Allie, for lending me your girl—seems like she's part mine, anyhow! You ought to feel proud to have a daughter who can give such pleasure as Molly gave us this afternoon! Good night! Good night, everybody!"

They were gone. Jen turned to the table.

"You leave things alone, Aunt Jen!" called Caroline's eager voice from the kitchen. "Molly and I'll attend to everything!"

"All right," Jen acquiesced in unaccustomed obedience. "Guess I'll just let you go ahead, girls! I'm going to set down a minute . . . I feel kind of tired!"

But first she went out to fetch a chair that had been left out under the maples.

Molly, drying dishes, was the first to come to her. Molly had suddenly flung dish towel aside.

"I've got to see Aunt Jen a minute!" she said to Caroline. "Something I have to tell her!"

She had to tell her about the vision. But she did not tell her, after all.

Jen was not in the living room and Molly went out on the porch and saw her sitting out there in the chair under the maples.

"Aunt Jen—you'll catch cold!" she called.

Jen did not answer, and Molly ran to her, fell on her knees on the browning grass beside her, seized the big hands that had served a lifetime for others. But she had somehow known before ever she reached her.

About ten, Molly came out into the kitchen. Oliver and Peter sat there. Peter was in Jen's old red-padded rocker and his hands seemed to cling to the chair as if somehow it were a part of Jen. Oliver was beside the table, the light from the lamp falling on his face, bleak and agonized with its hurt.

Molly went straight to him, put a hand on his shoulder.

"Where's the lantern, Ollie?" she asked.

"Lantern? What is it—do you want to go home?"

"No. Oh, no—I'm staying with Caroline! But where is it?"

He got up, hardly seeming to see her, and got the lantern from its place inside the sink cupboard, lighted it.

"Come!" said Molly.

He followed her out the door and down through the back yard. Molly paused at the edge of the orchard, put a quick comforting hand on his arm.

"Ollie, somehow, it seems *right*! She would have hated being old . . . and it was such a happy day—so—so—much love in it! I—I think she'd have wanted it . . . to quit . . . in the harness! Oh, Ollie—she was—she is a great woman!"

"Yes," said Oliver in a choked voice.

"She isn't really dead—she'll live in every home for miles around for years and years—she's a great woman, Ollie!"

She turned then abruptly and went in through the orchard till she came to the far end where the beehives stood. She held out the lantern to Oliver and went down on her knees in the damp grass, lifted a shaking hand, knocked gently.

"Don't go away—bees!" she said, with a sob like a child's. "Make sweet honey—for your—your new mistress!"

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Ollie put the lantern down with one swift movement. He reached down and pulled Molly up into his arms. She clung to him tiredly and his tears mingled with hers and their hurt became eased as one hurt. It was as if they were living in the midst of some terribly sweet, sad legend.

"Only—really," Molly said at last, her face tight against his, "there can *never* be any mistress here—but *her!*"

(1)

THE END

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